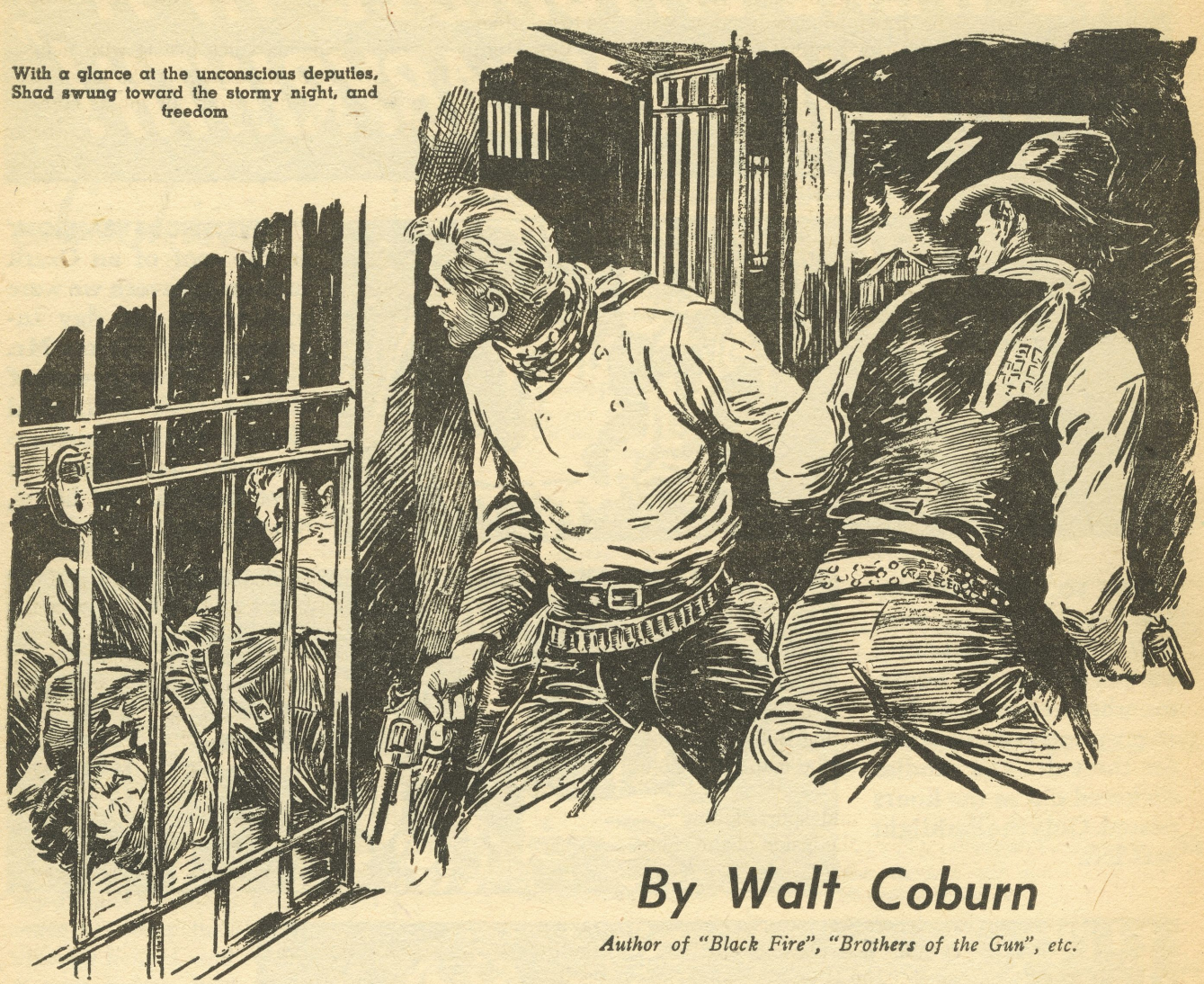
Wet Beef from Mexico



With a glance at the unconscious deputies, Shad swung toward the stormy night, and freedom

By Walt Coburn

Author of "Black Fire", "Brothers of the Gun", etc.

Build a ten-foot fence along the Border; burn the cattle-brands clear. Still the stolen herds slip away by night, and men die mysteriously. And only a cowman with a talent for the six-gun and a charge of Irish anger in him would dare to go calling at the Devil's ranch

CHAPTER I

CARTRIDGES COME CHEAP

THERE was a round moon and the stars hung low and patches of white clouds crossed the sky. It was the kind of a moonlight night that poets sing about and lovers wait for.

And as he rode along the trail that twisted its way through mesquite and giant sujuaro cactus Shed Gibson got to thinking about Rita Wagner and the promises they had made one another not so long ago on a night like this. And a slow smile played around the corners of his straight-lipped mouth and his eyes watched the fleecy clouds scudding across the stars.

Then he remembered where he was headed for and the sort of a job that had fetched him out on such a night. The smile left his mouth and his blue eyes hardened. A big cloud with black edges slid across the moon. Shad Gibson's hand was on his six-shooter as he followed the trail into the black depths of Mesquite Canyon. Twenty-five-year-old Shad was riding to Bob Huntoon's place to kill him.

Shad had never killed a man and the job wasn't one that he enjoyed. Shad was a little scared, too. He wasn't ready to die. But unless some queer trick of fate backed his play it was almost a cinch bet that he would stop one or two of Huntoon's bullets if he gave Bob Huntoon any sort of an even break.

Huntoon was a quick-triggered killer with a braggart's habit of filing notches on the butt of his ivory-handled gun to tally the men he had killed. And Shad Gibson was no better shot than the average brush-popper cowpuncher here in Arizona. While Bob Huntoon was doing his shooting Shad hoped to get that one shot that would kill Huntoon. Beyond that Shad Gibson hoped or asked for nothing. Just

that one shot that would finish that hydrophobia skunk.

He rode past the rock-and-brush stockade corral and branding chute. Past the low-roofed adobe barn. He could see a light burning behind the drawn window blind at Bob Huntoon's cabin. Shad thought it was odd that Huntoon's big brindle ketch dog did not come charging out at him, barking and growling a warning and keeping him in his saddle until Huntoon came to the door. Shad had counted on that big brindle dog fetching Huntoon to his cabin door. But the dog did not come charging out of the brush. Shad Gibson reined up about forty feet from the cabin.

"Come on out, Huntoon!" Shad tried to make his voice sound bold and dangerous. "Come out with your gun in your hand! It's Shad Gibson and I've come to kill you!"

No sound of any kind came from within the cabin. Shad shifted uneasily in his saddle, the palm of his hand wet with nervous sweat as he gripped his cedar-handled six-shooter. He made a plain target as he sat his horse in the moonlight. Huntoon could pick him off from the brush with one shot.

Something akin to panic gripped Shad. He spurred his horse closer to the cabin, alongside the curtained window. The barrel of his six-shooter smashed the windowpane. He struck at the cracked window shade with his gun, tearing it from the nails that held it to the top of the window frame. The fabric caught in the hammer of his gun, cocking it. His finger was pressing the trigger. The gun went off with a loud roar.

Shad's horse jumped, and for a moment or two Shad had all he could do quieting him. He tried to keep an eye on the door and shattered window, expecting Bob Huntoon to start shooting at him. But no sign of the man. No shout. No gun roar.

Shad whirled his lunging horse and spurred him near the window. He got a good look at the inside of the cabin. He saw Bob Huntoon sitting in a chair, his back to the window. He was slumped face down on a table that was littered with playing cards. There was a jug and glasses. A lighted lamp was on the table near the jug.

There was a widening red stain on Huntoon's soiled gray flannel shirt. The man was dead, shot in the back. His white-handled six-shooter was in its holster. Bob Huntoon had been killed without being given a chance to pull his gun.

There was no use in Shad getting off his horse and going into the cabin. Bob Huntoon was dead and that was that. Somebody had beaten Shad Gibson to the killing job, but the killer had committed cold-blooded murder.

Shad started back along the trail. It was as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. That heavy, dull aching pain no longer gripped his heart. Bob Huntoon was dead. Shad Gibson had no need now to use his six-shooter.

FOUR riders traveling at a lope loomed up out of the night. They pulled up, barring Shad Gibson's way. The big man with a deputy-sheriff's star pinned to his flannel shirt grinned mirthlessly.

"Whichaway in such a rush, Shad?"

"I'm on my way to the home ranch."

"Bin spendin' the evenin' with Huntoon, I reckon." The big deputy's voice was heavy with sarcasm and his lopsided grin was ugly. "We heard a shot, Gibson. You kin tell a man somethin' about it, mebby?"

"A shot? Oh. I reckon that was my gun you heard."

"So I kinda figgered. Hand over that gun of yours, Shad. Butt first. Bob Huntoon had better be enjoyin' good health or you'll be in a tight. You're ridin' back with us to Huntoon's place."

"Bob Huntoon," said Shad, his voice brittle with defiance, "is dead. He's bin shot in the back, by the looks of things. Somebody outside the window did the job as Huntoon sat at the table with a jug and a deck of cards. His back's toward the window.

"There was like as not a crack in the window shade. When I hollered and Huntoon didn't come out I smashed the window and tore down the window shade. My six-shooter went off by accident. I didn't kill Bob Huntoon."

"Handcuff him, boys. Yesterday in town he made his war talk. Sayin' that he was goin' to kill Bob Huntoon where he found 'im. Now he's tellin' us this windy about it bein' an accident. Huntoon had Shad Gibson arrested last week for cattle rustlin'. Gibson gits outa jail on bond and keeps his threat to kill Huntoon. Now he's lyin' out of it. Wrap 'im up, boys."

Deputy Sheriff Burt Thrasher's chuckle had menace in it. Thrasher and the dead Bob Huntoon were first cousins. They came from the same part of west Texas. Thrasher's Drag T cattle ranged with Huntoon's Walking H stuff on adjoining ranges. Bob Huntoon looked after both outfits because Burt Thrasher's duties as a peace officer kept him too busy to ride after his stock.

The big deputy led the way back to the Huntoon place. He remarked that it was shore odd that the ketch-dog Brin didn't come out of the brush barking and growling.

"Here's why, Burt," said one of the deputies, pointing to something on the ground at the edge of the brush. "Huntoon's ketch-dog is deader'n a rock. Shot in the head. The carcass drug off here in the brush."

The deputy went into the lighted cabin. He spent nearly half an hour examining the dead body and looking around outside with a lantern for tracks. Now and then he would take a big drink from the dead man's jug. He examined the broken window and the torn shade with a bullet hole in it.

"Looks like Bob was a-settin' here playin' a little game of solitaire and nibblin' at his jug when Shad Gibson here slipped up to the window, sighted Bob through the cracked window blind, and let him have it in the back. It taken just one shot to git the job done."

"Who shot the dog?" questioned Shad. "And does it look like Bob Huntoon would keep on playin' solitaire while I was shootin' his dog? There's just one empty shell in my gun, Thrasher. It would take two cartridges to kill the dog, then Huntoon. And how do you account for these fresh spots of blood over by the door? And does a man handle cards with his gloves on?"

The dead man's hands were covered with brush-scratched buckskin gloves.

There came the sound of shod hoofs outside. One of Burt Thrasher's special deputies challenging somebody in a loud harsh voice. Then a girl's voice, a little shrill with fear or anger or both, giving answer.

"Get out of my way, you big fourflusher!"

THEN a girl dressed in cowpuncher overalls and denim brush jacket, leather chaps and boots and spurs, stood in the doorway. Her face was white under its coating of tan and her reddish brown eyes were angry lights. Jet black hair showed from under her dusty Stetson that was

pulled out of shape from hard usage. She had cried out first at the deputy who tried to stop her; but now she turned to Shad Gibson:

"I tried to head you off, Shad. Why did you do it?"

"You'd orter know the answer to that 'un, Rita," said Deputy-sheriff Burt Thrasher. "You ribbed the trouble between Shad Gibson and my cousin Bob. It was over you, not a few mavericks, that they got to janglin' months ago. Gibson killed Bob Huntoon. Stood outside that window and shot Bob where his galluses cross. He was scared to give Bob Huntoon any kind of a fightin' chance for his taw."

"That's a lie." The girl's voice lost its sharp edge. It was dull, defiant, sullen. "Shad's no bushwhacker."

"Shad Gibson," said the big deputy flatly, "is as guilty as hell. Take him to town, boys. I'll stay here till the coroner gits here. Tell him to fetch a coroner's jury with him and to git here quick. Lock Shad Gibson in jail and throw the key away. Git back home where you belong, Rita."

"I'm going to town with Shad," said the girl.

"No." Shad Gibson grinned faintly at the girl. "You got good eyes and sharp wits, Rita. Take a look around. I didn't kill Huntoon. But somebody did. And nobody stood outside that window and shot Bob Huntoon in the back.

"He wasn't playin' cards with his gloves on. And where's his brush jacket? Huntoon was shot back in the hills and his dead body was fetched here and put in that chair at the table. Take a look at those cards. He was playin' solitaire, says the big law ox. But there's a red four on top of a red trey. A nine of diamonds on a eight of hearts. The rest of the cards is alternatin' black and red.

"Huntoon never got that drunk that he couldn't read his cards. He was a tin-horn gambler when he wasn't workin' at punchin' cows. Gamblers don't make simple card mistakes like that and they don't play with gloves on. Somebody in a hurry was panicky when they spread those cards out on the table.

"And there's three used whisky glasses here on the table. Whoever framed this picture of murder was either drunk or scared or clumsy. Look back in the hills for Huntoon's brush-jacket. See if his runnin' iron is on his saddle. You brag about that streak of Cherokee you've got, Rita. Injuns should know how to read sign. Read all the sign for what it says."

"Take him away, boys," said Burt Thrasher. "Lock 'im up. Don't let anybody git to him. One of you take Rita Wagner to her Campo Ranch. I'm ramroddin' this case and I don't want nobody cuttin' for sign that ain't there. Git goin'. Rita, you keep plumb outa this. You start gittin' underfoot and you'll git Shad Gibson hung and your brother Tom into a mess. I'm a-tellin' you straight."

Shad Gibson stared hard and long into the big deputy's bloodshot green eyes. Then he spoke to the girl, his voice flat-toned and heavy with defeat.

"Burt Thrasher is right, Rita. Ride on home. There ain't any sign to cut for. I rode here and killed Bob Huntoon. I'll take my medicine. Don't do anything that will git Tom into this mess."

Rita Wagner looked hard at Shad, then at the grinning deputy, then back at the blue-eyed, tow-headed Shad Gibson.

"Just as you say, Shad. I'll go back to the Campo Ranch."

CHAPTER II

IRISH AND TEQUILA MIX

THERE were four lawyers in the cow town of Campo, Arizona, near the Mexican Border. One of them was Miles Huntoon, brother of the murdered man. Miles Huntoon was the justice of peace; he enjoyed the reputation of sending enemies of his to prison for enough years to keep them out of circulation until their hair grew white and they tripped over their long whiskers.

A clever man with a disarming smile and suave manner that could, in a split second, turn into something as vitriolic as deadly acid. He could wheedle, flatter, bewilder or browbeat a jury into rendering a verdict of guilty. A dangerous man to have for an enemy, this tall, darkly handsome and well groomed Miles Huntoon.

The second attorney, who said that four shysters in one cow town amounted to a crowd and at least three too many, was Patrick Henry Connity. Pat Connity was a quart-a-day man with wrinkled, liquor-spotted clothes and a cutting wit. Disbarred in the East somewhere, he had come to Arizona, sobered up enough to pass the bar examinations, and settled down at Campo with a law library as shabby and stained as his clothes.

He drank tequila because it was the cheapest liquor a man could buy along the Mexican Border. A dog that showed the predominating strain of Irish terrier, and called O'Banion, was his constant companion. O'Banion ate sometimes when Pat Connity went hungry.

Patrick Henry, so rumor had drifted out of the man's vague past, had at one time been a criminal lawyer, who had ranked among the best until whisky, a woman and a stroke of bad luck had lost him a large practice and all he had back East. Pat Connity was handling the cattle-rustling case pending against Shad Gibson.

The other two attorneys hardly mattered. One was the lawyer for the big copper-mining company and his job occupied all his time and paid him too well for him to dabble with outside cases. His name was Dwight Smith. A dapper, shrewd man.

The other was an Arizona-born man of Mexican parentage, and he handled cases for the Mexicans who got into any sort of legal difficulties. Carlos Murillo had a buxom church-going wife and half a dozen children who liked to visit Pat Connity's cabin because he told them colorful Irish stories about the Little People of Ireland and how Saint Patrick drove the snakes into the sea so that there were no rattlesnakes to be found on the soil of Ireland.

On Sundays when Patrick Henry Connity shaved and bathed and put on a clean suit and shirt and went to mass Señora Murillo invited him to Sunday dinner. O'Banion shared the food given the numerous Murillo dogs and was attentive to the collie Queen Isabella.

On St. Patrick's day Pat Connity took a folded Irish flag—a golden harp on a green background—from his tin-covered trunk. He and the Murillo youngsters would fasten it to a flagpole in front of Pat Connity's adobe cabin. And on that day, when the Murillo tribe had departed, Pat Connity would get a little drunker than usual, sing Irish songs and flavor his talk with Gaelic.

From the window of his little adobe cabin Patrick Henry Connity saw the sheriff's posse ride into town with Shad Gibson. Shad, with his feet tied in the stirrups and his handcuffed hands tied to his rope-marked saddle horn.

O'Banion barked. Pat Connity lurched to the cabin doorway, his shock of reddish gray hair tousled, his face brick red, his eyes as blue and bright as the sky in spite of the tequila he had consumed. It was sunrise and Pat Connity had been up all night.

"What's the charge this time, lad?" He stumbled a little as he stepped out into the dusty street of Campo and halted the two deputies and their prisoner.

"They claim I murdered Bob Huntoon, Pat." Shad's grin was forced.

"Hell, Connity," said one of the special deputies, "go back to your bunk and sleep it off. You can't spring Shad Gibson on this 'un. He done confessed in front of witnesses. He's as good as hung. You can't git him out with one of them babees corpses and there ain't enough money in Arizona to git him out on bond. Shad Gibson is a gone goslin!"

"If he shot Bob Huntoon I'll whittle him a wooden medal. I'll be over as soon as I give O'Banion his breakfast, Shadrock. If you killed Black Bob Huntoon 'twas self defense and not murder."

Shad's grin was stiff-lipped. "Burt Thrasher gave these brave hombres orders to lock me up and throw the key away. I killed Bob Huntoon, Pat. I'm willin' to hang for it. There ain't a thing you kin do. I'm obliged, just the same."

The two special deputies rode on with their prisoner. O'Banion whined softly. Pat Connity stumbled back into his cabin, his dog at his heels.

PAT CONNITY fed O'Banion the sirloin steak he had bought yesterday. The wire-haired reddish dog wagged his stump of a tail, his ragged ears cocked perplexedly, his brown eyes looking up at the man he worshipped.

"There's somethin' more than the killin' of Black Bob Huntoon," said Pat Connity, "that's botherin' our young friend Shadrock. Otherwise he'd have given you the top of the mornin', O'Banion. The lad's no murderer. No forked-tongue Miles Huntoon and one of his packed juries is hangin' the lad. Now eat your steak."

The dog left the meat almost untouched on his dish. Pat Connity made a wry face as he poured out a drink and tossed it off. He put the bottle away in a cupboard.

"When the O'Banion leaves a steak untouched and tequila tastes like gall and wormwood juice in the mouth of Patrick Henry Connity," said the attorney, " 'tis time for us to be doin' something to remedy such a disastrous situation."

He went to the back door and called across the arroyo toward the white-walled adobe dwelling of Carlos Murillo.

"Aurelio! Panchito! Pasqual! Joaquin! *Pronto, muchachos!* And fetch the buckets! Only the caballeros this morning. The little *señoritas* can come over later."

There was an adobe-walled well in back. A large wooden bucket with rope and pulley and windlass. Five minutes later Patrick Henry Connity stood in a little shed near the well, stripped to the waist and wearing faded cotton jeans. Four small Mexican boys hauled up pail after pail of very cold water and sloshed it over the man's head and torso. Jabbering and laughing and enjoying their fun. Until Pat Connity stood there shivering and wet and cold sober. Then he dried himself with a rough towel until his hide glowed.

Then he sent the boys home with their empty tin pails and each with a piece of candy and two extra pieces of the chocolate sweet.

"One for Margarita, one for Lupe. We mustn't ever forget the little *señoritas*."

The oldest boy, Aurelio, was back in a few minutes with a clean white shirt and a white linen suit that had been cleaned and pressed by the Señora Murillo.

"Mama says to dress quick and come to the breakfast before she get cold."

"Thank the *señora* and tell her that I'll be right over and to put whiskers on the coffee. O'Banion will share a steak, perhaps, with Queen Isabella. Your mama is the uncanonized Saint of Campo. I'll be there quicker than you can say Jack Robinson."

"Jack Robinson," promptly said the fourteen-year-old Aurelio. Then he was gone.

LESS than an hour later Pat Connity sat in the office of Judge Miles Huntoon. There was no smile on Pat Connity's tanned red face and no trace of stagger in his gait as he walked into the office and sat down without invitation. His shirt and white linen suit were spotless and he wore a green necktie. His sky-blue eyes were hard and cold, his voice brittle.

"Your brother Bob has been killed. My client Shadrock Gibson is in jail accused of murder. I want to know the score, Huntoon."

"That's the exact score, Connity. Bob Huntoon was shot in the back. Shad Gibson has admitted the murder. Made a confession before substantial witnesses. Hanging is too quick and merciful a punishment for the man who murdered my brother.

"I'm sending Shad Gibson to Yuma Prison for the rest of his natural life. That's all, Connity. Take your cur with you when you go out. I hate dogs and fleas bother me."

"You're not, however, bothered a bit by lice. I want to see my client Shadrock Gibson. I'm his attorney; you are bound by the laws of Arizona to allow a prisoner to see his lawyer. Or are you familiar with Arizona law?"

Miles Huntoon's dark, handsome face flushed. His pale gray eyes were like ice.

"The prisoner has confessed. He needs no lawyer. However, if you think it will do you any good—" Miles Huntoon called to one of the men who had brought Shad Gibson to town.

"Take Connity over to jail. Let him talk to Shad Gibson through the bars. Search him first. We don't want our eminent barrister slipping his client a gun or knife or a key to the jail."

Pat Connity submitted to the humiliating formality of being searched for concealed weapons. O'Banion growled.

"Take it easy, O'Banion. You've had breakfast. You should know that if you took a bite of that kind of meat you'd die of poison."

But at the jail Pat Connity was able to get nothing out of Shad Gibson.

"Thanks, Pat. But you can't do me any good."

"You sign a confession, Shadrock, and I'll have you declared insane. You're covering for somebody or I'm a Chinaman. So long."

Pat Connity was harnessing his sorrel team Cork and Kerry and the six small Murillos were greasing the wheels of his buckboard, when Rita Wagner rode up on a sweat marked horse.

"The top of the mornin', Rita. You've saved me a drive in the heat of the day."

He pulled the harness off his team while Rita Wagner stabled her horse and the young Murillos were finally on their way home across the arroyo.

From Rita Wagner the attorney got the story of the killing of Black Bob Huntoon. Pat Connity listened in silence, interrupting now and then to get straight some detail. In the end he nodded slowly, a troubled thought clouding his bright blue eyes.

"Shad has confessed to that murder, Pat," the girl said in a low tone she tried to make steady, "because he thinks my brother Tom did the killing. Shad may not believe that Tom is guilty, but he is afraid that they will somehow prove it and that Tom will be sent to Yuma."

"Yuma," said Pat Connity, "would sober up that wild young brother of yours. Where is he? Where was he last evening or last night when Bob Huntoon was shot in the back?"

"I don't know, Pat. He hasn't been at the ranch for nearly a week. He might be at the Vidal ranch across the Border. I'd rather be skinned alive than ride there but if I have to, I will. Rosita Vidal—"

"The Golden Rose of San Luis." Pat Connity's smile was tight-lipped, grim. "You don't need to humiliate yourself to that extent, Rita. Tom will show up. Our Golden Rose might furnish him with an alibi. She'd perjure herself if there was enough money in it. She might furnish a real alibi for Tom at that.

"Your brother Tom has his faults but the boy's no murderer. He's been mixed up with Black Bob Huntoon in some Mexican cattle rustling and Burt Thrasher has something on him and Tom had that ugly quarrel with Shadrock Gibson. But he wouldn't murder Bob Huntoon even if he was afraid of Black Bob.

"For all his wildness he's got too much courage for cold-blooded murder. The thing's an ugly mess. If Shadrock Gibson puts his name to a signed confession, there's no stopping Miles Huntoon from sending that lad to Yuma. So we've got to act fast and make no mistakes."

"But how, Pat? What can we do?"

"Is Pecos Driscoll at the ranch?"

"Pecos is ramrodding a pack spread that's catching wild cattle in the mountains," said the girl. I sent a Mexican out to tell him to come to town. He'll be here before dark."

"Locate Pecos. Tell him to get to town after dark and not before. To be riding a fast horse and leading another good horse. A saddled horse, Rita, with a Winchester in the saddle scabbard, a belt full of cartridges and a six-shooter hanging from the saddle horn. Tell him to come to my barn. He'll find me here at my house."

"You mean, Pat, that you're going to—"

"Never ask Patrick Henry Connity questions, colleen. Now scratch the O'Banion's ears and be goin'. This tie is chokin' me and I'm gettin' this clean suit wrinkled.

"I'm tryin' somethin' new in the way of a habeas corpus that ain't in any volume of Blackstone. And keep your head in the stars, colleen."

CHAPTER III

BLACK-AND-GOLD TRAIL

THE day had been sultry. At dusk the heat lightning reddened the desert sky in the far distance. A huge black cloud rolled up out of Mexico and the heavy electrical storm broke an hour before midnight.

Shad Gibson had watched the brilliantly colored sunset from his barred jail window. The dusk was hot and sticky and it bathed him with sweat. There was no sleep for the young cowpuncher and he stood by the little barred window and watched the chain lightning split the black sky.

The rush of a heavy wind sent sheets of cooling rain through the barred window. Shad stood there, letting the rain drench him, cooling his hot body, washing away the dull headache that had tortured him all day. Lightning and thunder crashed. He thought it must be the noisy force of the storm that rattled the iron bars of his cell door.

Then a voice that was vaguely familiar called his name. A big key fumbled at the heavy lock. The cell door opened. The man's voice sounded through the thunder of the storm.

"It's me, Shad. Pecos Driscoll. Rattle your hocks. We're headin' for what the feller calls the wide open spaces. Buckle on this six-shooter."

A white flash of lightning showed the tall, rawboned, homely faced ramrod of the big Campo Ranch. Pecos Driscoll, the brush-popper cowhand who was trying to hold together the big Border cow outfit that young Tom Wagner had been gambling away since his father's death a couple of years ago.

Pecos had a six-shooter in one hand. His free hand gripped Shad Gibson's arm, propelling him towards the open jail door and the stormy night outside.

A lightning flash showed Burt Thrasher's two special deputies behind the bars of a locked cell. They were tied and gagged. Blood from a smashed nose reddened the face of one man. The other lay with his eyes closed, blood oozing from a scalp wound. Both men were unconscious.

Pecos led the way through the night to a patch of mesquite brush where two saddled horses stood tied, rumps to the driving rain.

They mounted and rode away. As they passed the lighted cabin of Attorney at Law Patrick Henry Connity they could see that gentleman lazing in the doorway, a bottle of tequila in his hand, the terrier O'Banion beside his master, ragged ears erect, stubby tail wagging.

Pat Connity saluted with the bottle as they rode past at a long lope. Then the cabin door closed.

"Drunk or sober," said Pecos, the rush of the storm tearing the words from his unshaved lips, "there's a feller that will shore do to take along. Him and his six-shooter habeas corpus. He said to ask you did you sign ary kind of a confession, Shad."

"No. I signed nothin', Pecos."

"Then," said the big cowpuncher, "we won't have to stick up Miles Huntoon on our way outa town to git ary signed confession away from him. After all, it's ag'in' the law to shoot one of them judges."

THEY rode at a long trot, their horses sloshing through mud and water. Pecos Driscoll said he didn't reckon there was any big rush because Deputy Sheriff Burt Thrasher was somewhere on the trail to Campo with the coroner and a special deputy or two and maybe the dead body of Black Bob Huntoon, on their way back to town.

"And we're headed acrost the Mexican Border," Pecos finished. "You kin hole-up at the Vidal ranch. Rosita will keep you from gettin' too lonesome."

"To hell with Rosita!" Shad Gibson exploded.

Pecos Driscoll chuckled. "Them's Pat Connity's orders, Shad. He's got a notion you might find out somethin' from the Golden Rose of San Luis as he calls Rosita. Find out from her where Tom Wagner has bin keepin' hisself for the past week. If Tom and Black Bob fetched ary Mexican cattle through the pass on the Vidal grant. Kinda check up on young Tom. Them's Pat Connity's orders."

"Pat thinks Tom killed Black Bob Huntoon?"

"I don't know what Pat Connity thinks," replied Pecos. "He's a hard man to figger out. But bet on this. He ain't sendin' you to the Vidal ranch just to git you acrost the Mexican line where Burt Thrasher can't arrest you.

"You stuck your head in a hangin' loop because you had a notion Tom Wagner mighta killed Black Bob Huntoon. Burt Thrasher kinda threatened you into it, knowin' how you feel to'rd the Little Boss. She done told me about it when she sent me to town to yank you outa jail." Rita Wagner was the Little Boss to Pecos Driscoll.

"Nobody hired me, son. Pat Connity and the Little Boss asked me to git you outa the calaboose. I didn't need no hirin' to do you a favor. I come over the Tascosa trail from Texas with your daddy Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner. All three of us young fellers.

"Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner got married and settled down and I invested my wages in rot-gut likker and bob-tail flushes. Bill and Pete got me out of a bad tight and Pat Connity helped 'em. You're Bill Gibson's boy Shad. I'm workin' for Pete Wagner's little girl Rita. Yeah, and for young Tom, even if he is an ornery young whelp.

"I'd be dead or dyin' slow in Yuma prison right now if it hadn't bin for Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner and Pat Connity. And there's somethin' I never told nobody but Pat Connity. Bill Gibson wasn't drug to death by a horse four years ago. He was knocked on the head and his foot hung in the stirrup to make it look like he'd bin drug to death by his horse. And it was three-four white men, not a bunch of Mexican rebels that killed Pete Wagner just south of the border."

"You're certain of that, Pecos?"

"Dead certain. I read the sign and I know. But Pat Connity told me that the time wasn't ripe to do anything about it. There was no proof. There never will be no proof till somebody talks. And the men that did them two killin's ain't the talkin' kind."

"My dad didn't have an enemy in the country that I know of, Pecos. Pete Wagner, so far as I know, didn't have any enemies either. Who would want to murder 'em?"

"Bill Gibson owned one of the best small outfits in Arizona. Plenty of water even in drought years. And it lays next to the Mexican line. If Bill had wanted to handle what we called wet cattle along the Rio Grande where big drives of stolen Mexican cattle was crossed when the moon was right, he could have made a big fortune.

"But Bill Gibson wouldn't have nothin' to do with Border renegades. You know that. The ranch is yourn now and you've kept that Border closed the same as your daddy did."

"He made me promise him that not long before he died, Pecos. The Border along my place is closed with a ten wire fence. It stays that way. When I want Mexican cattle I ride down into Sonora and buy 'em from their Mexican owners. Cross 'em at the inspection station."

"But that Half-circle G ranch of yourn would be the purtiest ranch on the Mexican Border for anybody that likes the big profits that kin be made handlin' wet cattle. That's why Square Bill Gibson was killed. That's why somebody would like to see Shad Gibson shot or hung or sent to the Yuma pen so that they could git a-holt of the Half-circle G ranch. That's why Black Bob Huntoon was killed and you got framed for the killin'."

"When you put it like that, Pecos, it makes me plain dumb for not seein' through the game."

"Kinda dumb, at that," Pecos agreed. He reached over and slapped Shad on the back. "The Campo ranch joins yourn on the north. It's a big layout. Them same fellers want the Campo Ranch. So they murdered Pete Wagner like they had murdered Bill Gibson a year or two before."

"Nobody ever offered to buy me out. Nobody, so far as I know, ever offered to buy out Pete Wagner."

"They didn't have the money to buy either outfit. Besides, why pay money when a couple of killin's kin do the job? Ca'tridges is cheap."

THE storm had blown over and the stars were beginning to show. The moon pushed itself from behind the black clouds. Pecos and Shad had left the town of Campo far behind.

Their wet clothes were beginning to dry out. The night breeze following the rain was chilly. Shad shivered inside his wet denim brush jacket. Pecos pulled up as they topped a ridge that was spotted with mesquite and palo verde and cactus. He fished a quart bottle from the deep pocket of his bullhide chaps.

"Here's where I turn back. And yonder is Mexico and in an hour you'll be eatin' breakfast at the Vidal Ranch. A little dram of Pat Connity's tequila will take the chill out of our gizzards. Drink hearty."

"I'm kinda leary of the stuff, Pecos. I nursed Dad through some bad drunks. They claim he was drunk when—"

"Mebby he was and mebby he wasn't. Mebby booze made him keerless and he let some feller he trusted knock him over the head with the barrel of a six-shooter. But Bill Gibson wasn't the drinkin' man some claimed him to be.

"Your mother dyin' kinda throwed him and he would drink too much when he got to grievin'. But Bill Gibson wasn't no drunkard. And you're too damn stubborn and mule headed to let it git a tail-holt on you. Drink hearty. It'd be a mighty good idee for you to smell of likker when you show up at the Vidal ranch. Let Rosita think you're doin' a littl bottle h'istin'. Savvy?"

Pecos Driscoll took a long drink and handed the half-empty bottle to Shad.

"I poured me about half this bottle into a pint flask that'll take me to camp. You shove this in your chaps pocket, Shad. Take another snort just before you git to the Vidal Ranch. Act like you was feelin' shore loose and careless, savvy?

"You've just broke jail at Campo and you're on the dodge in Mexico. You're Give-a-damn Gibson and Rosita Vidal is the Golden Rose of San Luis and the purtiest thing in the wide world. Her old man, Don Pablo, is your Mexican neighbor and *muy simpatica*. Play the game thataway and see what happens.

"Beat Tom Wagner's time with the *señorita*. Listen with both ears when Don Pablo hints about you and him makin' a hidden gate in that barb-wire fence between the Half-circle G ranch and the Vidal Grant. They'll be playin' you like a fisherman plays a trout.

"But when you're holdin' hands in the moonlight with the Golden Rose, use your left hand. Keep your gun hand free and close to your six-shooter."

Shad nodded. "Rosita ain't as bad as the talk says she is. But she's not my kind. The Golden Rose of San Luis is out of my class. I'm just a cowhand."

"She thinks you'll do to take along," grinned Pecos. "Play your cards like you was holdin' aces. But remember this, son. That Golden Rose of San Luis ain't no flower. She's plenty dangerous. Men have killed one another to ketch her eye. She'd knife a man in the back if he doublecrossed her. Well, so long, Shad. Good luck. I'll be somewheres not too far off if you git into a tight."

Pecos Driscoll rode off into the night. Shad Gibson rode the moonlit trail toward the Vidal Ranch across the Mexican Border.

IT WAS nearing dawn and Shad was following a trail that led from the upper end of the Vidal Grant to Bob Huntoon's place. The cloven hooves of Mexican cattle had deepened the trail to a wide ditch in places where the ground was soft. On either side were patches of catclaw and mesquite and palo verdes. Giant sujuaro cactus stood like ghostly sentinels against the paling sky.

Few honest men ever traveled this trail. The Border Patrol cursed it as they tried in vain with their short-handed force of officers to stop the leak of Mexican cattle.

Shad's horse shied at something that lay on the ground, half hidden by the brush. Shad, lost in brooding thought, started, jerked his six-shooter. Then he pulled up, grinned faintly when he made certain nobody was hidden in the brush, and dismounted.

He picked up the thing that had spooked his horse. It was a faded denim brush-jacket, sodden from the recent rain. It was buttoned and the sleeves were knotted around the body of the jumper which contained some bulky package. Knotted saddle strings completed the wrapping of the denim bundle.

Hefting it in his hand, Shad took careful note of his surroundings. The trail here crossed a dry wash. A few hours ago during the heavy rain the dry wash had been filled with water that made a swift flowing little river. The water had washed the bundle down from somewhere above in the foothills and it had lodged in the brush along the trail.

Shad untied the knotted sleeves and cut the leather strings. A money belt made of soft-oiled whang leather dropped out of the jumper and onto the ground. The pockets of the money belt, closed by glove snaps, were bulgy. Shad opened them, one by one.

Each of the ten pockets held a roll of currency. The money was hardly damp. There was no time now to count it all. But the contents of one pocket tallied up to an even thousand dollars. Shad counted it and replaced it in the pocket. Then he buckled on the money belt beneath his shirt.

There was a tally book in the buttoned breast pocket of the denim brush-jacket. It was wet and the pages stuck together. He found a dry match and by its light he read the name on the inside of the leather cover—Bob Huntoon.

In the back of the jacket was a round hole big enough for Shad to run a forefinger through. Bob Huntoon had been wearing this brush-jacket when he was shot in the back.

"It's a thousand-to-one bet," Shad Gibson told himself as he rolled the brush-jumper and tied it on his saddle, then mounted, "that Bob Huntoon was wearin' this filled money belt when he was killed. That whoever killed him was scared to be caught with that money.

"So he pulled off Black Bob's jacket, wrapped the money belt in it, tied 'er in a bundle and cached it somewheres above here. The rain washed it down here. And that's that. The man or men that bushwhacked Bob Huntoon killed him for this money.

"But where did Bob Huntoon git that much money? Where was he takin' it? Why didn't the killer or killers keep the money? Who did they think might search 'em for it?"

CHAPTER IV

PERILOUS HACIENDA

PABLO VIDAL, better known as Don Pablo, owner of the somewhat impoverished old San Luis Grant, was a product of the revolutions that had swept over Mexico time after time. He had changed sides whenever he could anticipate which faction would tomorrow be in power.

The last successful rebellion had netted him the vast San Luis Grant in reward for services such as the running of guns and ammunition and stolen gringo horses to the rebels. But bands of rebel raiders, federal soldiers and gringo cattle rustlers had sadly depleted the once great herds of cattle that wore the original brand of the San Luis Grant. The brand was a four-petal flower like a four leaf clover that was known along the Border as the Rose of San Luis.

So Don Pablo, rich in land but poor in cattle, shrewd in the ways of making money along the Border and poisoned by a bitter hatred for more fortunate owners of ranches on both sides of the Mexican Line, was playing a dangerous but lucrative game. His vaqueros were the best that money could hire. He mounted them on the fastest cow horses in Sonora. He paid them well and they followed his orders.

The result was that many cattle grazing on the vast Vidal Grant wore blotched brands and were drifted soon after branding across the border into Arizona. With the money thus gained, Don Pablo would buy cattle that were brought across the Border from Arizona and New Mexico.

But Don Pablo was not satisfied. Instead of hundreds there should be thousands of cattle wearing his Rose of San Luis brand and fattening on his huge Vidal Grant. Don Pablo was an ambitious man. If he could only form a working partnership with some rich gringo who could obtain the ownership of the Half-circle G and the big Campo ranches, then in a few years men would be calling Don Pablo the biggest cattleman along the Mexican border.

Put a gate in that Gibson fence, trail through that gateway the cows that Don Pablo's vaqueros would steal from his Mexican neighbors and enemies, breed those cows to shorthorn and hereford bulls, graze those cattle on both sides of the Mexican Border—then Don Pablo's great dream of a cattleman's empire would come true. His Vidal Ranch would straddle the Mexican line for more than fifty miles on either side.

"Say prayers," he told his fat, sad-eyed *señora*, "until there are callouses on your thick knees. Burn a thousand

candles to the Lady of Guadalupe. Go to every mass that always begging padre of yours holds in the church. Give him some money, not too much, for his always starving peons. You are my wife. Do your duty."

And to his daughter Rosita he would say, "Waste not your time on these guitar-playing caballeros who own nothing but their clothes and a sore-backed horse. Play up to that young gringo, Tomas Wagner. Sing to him, make eyes at him, feed him more wine. He and his sister own the big Campo ranch. And the next time that other gringo Shad Gibson comes, make him think that he is the one. Once you had him eating out of your hand, no?"

"No. Shad Gibson eats from no woman's hand. But let it pass, Papa. The next time will be different. If there comes a next time. *Por Dios,* there is a man, that tow head."

"Keep your head on your shoulders. Keep your heart free. I will tell you when it is time to fall in love with a man. You will marry that man. He is the man who will own the Gibson and Wagner ranches."

"What is his name, Papa? Miles Huntoon?" Rosita's dark eyes, golden in the sunlight, were as innocent now as a baby's. Her voice silky.

"Quien sabe? Who can tell? I have more than one branding iron in the fire. More than one gringo in mind. The best man will win. My Rose of San Luis brand will be marked on him and burned on the hides of his cattle. The Vidal Rancho will reach far across the gringo side of the Border. When I die it will belong to you, the Golden Rose. Now don't bother me with silly questions."

DON PABLO was at the long low-roofed barn when Shad Gibson rode up to the Vidal ranch. The old San Luis Rancho that was like a small Mexican village with its many building, its corrals, its church.

The old Spanish bell in the old church was calling the faithful to six o'clock mass. The Señora Vidal, dressed in black, a black *rebozo* over her graying head, led a procession of men, women and children into the church. Shad saw Rosita join the procession. She saw him, recognized him, dropped a few paces behind her mother and waved. Shad lifted his hat.

"Señor Shad Gibson!" Don Pablo, lean, hawk-beaked, black-eyed, his thick iron gray moustache trimmed, his lean, muscled body clad in a shabby leather charro jacket and tight-fitting trousers that flared wide where they met his high-heeled boots and huge rowled silver-crusted spurs, doffed his big sombrero which was crusted with gold and silver threaded designs. *"Compadre mio!* Caballero!"

"Don Pablo!" Shad grinned, his hat in his hand. *"Señor!"*

Pablo Vidal spoke English with hardly a trace of Mexican accent. His sharp black eyes noticed the neck of the tequila bottle protruding from the pocket of Shad's brush-scarred chaps. The black eyes glinted. The smile twisted faintly.

"Get down, my young friend," he said in English. "You look weary. Come on to the house. The women have gone to church. We'll have a quiet little drink before they get back to the house, eh?"

A barefooted peon took Shad's horse. He unbuckled his chaps, grinning as the almost empty tequila bottle fell on the ground. Don Pablo smiled and kicked the bottle aside.

"I have better liquor than that at the house. Tequila is for Mexicans. I have rye whiskey that is twenty years old. You are celebrating some holiday, no, my friend?"

"A holiday from Yuma prison," said Shad. "I broke jail last night at Campo. They had me locked up for killing Bob Huntoon."

"Madre de Dios! For killing that one they should give you a reward."

There was no reading anything in the black eyes of Don Pablo, but Shad detected an odd note in the Mexican's voice. Something almost like alarm. Bob Huntoon had been killed between his place and the Vidal Ranch. Had he been on his way to or from Don Pablo's ranch with that belt filled with money?

"Deputy-sheriff Burt Thrasher," said Shad, "and Judge Miles Huntoon have other ideas. But their law can't reach across the Mexican Border."

"My house is yours, my friend. Yon are safe here from anything or anybody. You have my promise for that."

Shad thanked Don Pablo as the latter led the way to the rambling hacienda. Inside the three-foot adobe walls it was cool and the light that came through the barred windows was soft and gray in the huge living room.

Patterned Mexican tiles floored the house. Hand-carved, richly upholstered old furniture filled the room. Hand-embroidered Spanish tapestries hung on the plastered walls. Spanish rugs in soft colors.

Don Pablo led the way through the huge living room and into a smaller room that had leather-bound chairs and a huge flat-topped desk. The heavy black-walnut desk was covered with papers and books, writing materials, a box of Mexican cigars.

"On Sunday mornings when the visiting padre manages to get here," explained Don Pablo, "the *doña* gathers every human being on the place and herds them to mass. All but the heathen Indio who took your horse. And myself. Me, I lost what belief I ever had in their *Señor Dios* when I was a boy. When I saw my father and mother, my sisters and brothers butchered by the church-going soldiers of Porfirio Diaz.

"So the servants are on their knees over yonder, and breakfast will have to wait. And I'll have to serve the drinks."

Shad had emptied the bulk of the tequila in his bottle on the ground, spilling enough on his clothes to leave a strong odor of the stuff. That one drink he had taken had long ago worn off. But he did his best to act tipsy. The drink of whisky Don Pablo gave him hit his empty stomach like liquid fire, warming him all over. He no longer had to pretend. He was tipsy.

"I'm an outlaw now, Don Pablo. I can't go back to my ranch. They'll put a price on my head and hunt me down. Thrasher and Bob Huntoon had already framed a cattle-rustlin' charge against me. Now they're after me for murder. I can't even cross the Border to gather my own cattle."

"The gathering of your cattle, my friend, can be arranged. I'll buy your cattle. My vaqueros can round up every head you own in a week. If there was only a gate in that fence you father built along the Border, it would save much time and a long drive around through the inspection station."

Shad toyed with his second drink, nodding doubtfully. "It could be arranged, perhaps, *señor.* We can talk about it later. Right now I'd like to clean up some before I meet the others. I need a shave and a bath and—"

"And some sleep, no? I have clean clothes that will fit you. This is your home, my *amigo.*"

There was a sunken bath tub of Mexican onyx. A razor and strop and soap that reeked of perfume. A big hand-carved Spanish bed. Outside the barred window a fountain splashed in the patio and birds sang in the old fruit trees. Shad cached the money belt under the hard mattress and shoved his six-shooter under his pillow before he dropped off into a tipsy, dream-racked slumber.

IT WAS noon when he awoke. There was clear cold water in the onyx tub and clean clothes laid out on a chair. He looked under the mattress. The filled money belt was still there. He sloshed in the cold water until the dull pain in his head was gone. Then he dressed in a suit of soft leather charro clothes and soft white shirt. His boots had been polished and put with the clean clothes.

Before he buckled on the money belt next to his skin he counted its contents. Ten thousand dollars. The brand tally book with Bob Huntoon's name in it was still too wet to permit handling. He put it back into the money belt with the currency. The book might contain some sort of important data.

He hesitated about buckling on his cartridge belt. It was hardly in accordance with polite manners to go around a host's house wearing a belt full of cartridges and a six-shooter. But he knew that Don Pablo always carried a hidden gun. Shad finally compromised by shoving his six-shooter into the waistband of the tight fitting charro pants and covering it with his shirt. He dropped a dozen cartridges into his pockets.

He took a long look at himself in the large gilt-framed mirror. A clean-shaven, tanned, tow-headed cowpuncher in Mexican charro clothes of soft brown leather. A narrow red sash around his middle. A black necktie.

"All I need," he muttered at his reflection, "is a guitar and some moonlight."

Señora Vidal was nowhere around. Don Pablo made her excuses for her. She was off somewhere in the buckboard with the padre visiting the families of the Mexicans who had been unable to attend mass.

Rosita, Don Pablo said, was taking her siesta. They had expected Shad to sleep through the day.

"So you and I, my *amigo,*" said Don Pablo, smiling, "will eat and smoke and talk and perhaps we shall get to know one another better. *Quien sabe?*"

So Don Pablo had sent the good *doña* off with the brown-frocked padre to get them both away from the hacienda. And Rosita would go on shift after sundown. Meanwhile the wily Don Pablo would get the gringo in a melow mood and see about the opening of a gate in the ten-wire Border fence, about the purchase of the Half-circle G cattle, the lease or outright purchase, perhaps, of the Gibson ranch.

The meal was what a hungry man would dream about. The whisky was aged and mellow. Shad rolled his own cigarettes from tobacco and brown papers furnished by his host. The talk was pleasant. To Shad's surprise no mention was made concerning the fence or the buying of the Half-circle G cattle. Don Pablo was the perfect Mexican host. And the world can show no finer host than the true Mexican.

Shad Gibson was puzzled and on guard. Behind all this suave hospitality was a sinister and dangerous and treacherous something that put him on his guard. He got the feeling that behind that suave and genial and smiling manner Don Pablo was uneasy and nervous and as tense as a coiled rattler ready to strike.

Shad used his left hand to lift his drinks and hold his cigarette. His right hand never got more than a few inches from his gun. His ears kept listening for sounds beyond the thick adobe walls of Don Pablo's private office and smoking room. His eyes kept shifting toward the outer window that faced the barn and corrals. Now and then toward the other barred window that looked out on the patio.

And the eyes and ears of Don Pablo were just as alert as those of his gringo guest. It was like a game of two-handed poker. Don Pablo was the first to weaken and come to the point.

"You seem uneasy, my *amigo.*" He smiled.

"I'm a hunted man, *señor.* When a man is hunted like an animal he must keep his eyes open and his ears cocked." Shad used the Mexican language. "And you, *señor?* Who is it you are expecting?"

"I have my enemies. Perhaps those enemies saw you ride here. Besides, I am expecting someone. Friend or enemy. *Quien sabe?* It is hard to tell. I lead a dangerous life, my friend. Who are they who know you have ridden here to my rancho? Who and how many?"

THE question came like a thrown knife. Don Pablo was leaning forward in his chair, brown, long fingered hands gripping the edge of his flat-topped desk. His eyes were red-black coals. His voice had the sharpness of a honed steel blade.

That last drink of whisky had dulled Shad's nerves so that the quick thrust of the question lost its sharpness. He grinned and spoke slowly, his voice an Arizonan's drawl, his blue eyes hard and unflinching as he voiced his deliberate lie.

"Nobody knows where I am, Don Pablo. If I'm gettin' you in wrong by ridin' here, it's time I saddle my horse and drifted yonderly. I've still got the rest of Mexico to hide out in. Just what's on your mind, *señor?*"

"Did you kill Bob Huntoon?"

"I'm accused of it. If I stood trial I'd hang for it."

"You confessed."

"Then you've had visitors from Campo. That should teach me a lesson about drinkin' so much I drop off into a drunken stupor. They're here after me?"

Don Pablo shook his head. "One of my vaqueros rode in from Campo while you were asleep. He brought the news."

Likewise, Shad told himself, the vaquero had fetched a message from Miles Huntoon or Burt Thrasher.

"The reward on my hide?" Shad grinned mirthlessly.

"Ten thousand dollars!" Don Pablo's voice was cold.

Shad, on guard now, managed an easy grin. His voice lost nothing of its drawl. His eyes were blue and hard and steady.

"That's a lot of money, *señor.* More than my hide is worth. It's as much as my whole outfit's worth. Ten thousand dollars reward for my scalp don't sound right to me. There must be a mistake somewheres."

"There is no mistake," Don Pablo spoke in his carefully chosen, clipped English. "The reward is ten thousand dollars. Dead or alive."

"You'd make a nice little profit by killin' me, *señor.*"

Shad leaned back in his chair, thumbs hooked in the

red silk sash around his middle. His right hand touched the butt of the six-shooter beneath his borrowed white silk shirt. There was a hard, tight grin on his mouth.

If Don Pablo had a gun hidden beenath the top of his desk now was the time he could go after it and try his luck. Shad was ready for him.

"I would not doublecross a true friend," said Don Pablo, "for a million dollars in gold. But I would kill an enemy just to watch him kick his way into Hell. I have proved both facts more than once during my life.

"The reward placed on your head is not offered by Arizona. It is a private matter. Perhaps you are in a position to understand my meaning. Perhaps you know why the amount of the reward is ten thousand dollars and no more, no less. Eh?"

Don Pablo's two hands still gripped the edge of his desk. He was leaning forward, tense as a man about to leap.

Shad knew that it was a question of split-seconds who could draw and shoot first. Shad, ready to tip his chair over sideways and draw his gun and shoot, was framing in his mind the answer to Don Pablo's question.

The door opened suddenly. Don Pablo and Shad jerked around, their guns in their hands. Both on their feet.

Rosita Vidal stood there in the doorway. It was easy to understand why men called her the Golden Rose. Her skin was the color of pale gold. Dark eyes flecked with gold. Reddish hair with golden highlights.

She wore a dress that matched the color of her eyes. It clung to her tall slender figure like a sheath. She looked into the black muzzles of the two guns, smiled into the faces of the two men. Then her laugh, so soft and throaty that it was barely audible, mocked them.

"What a delightful way to welcome a lady! Am I supposed to put up my hands? Scream? Faint, perhaps? I'm too lazy to put up my hands. I hate screaming. And I seldom faint. *Por Dios,* put those guns away. How are you, Shad?"

Don Pablo's face was bone white as he muttered something and shoved his gun back into a slot beneath the top of his desk. Shad grinned faintly and shoved his gun into the waistband of his charro pants. He took Rosita Vidal's outstretched hand. It was as cold as ice, trembling.

IT WAS said of Rosita Vidal that she was the most beautiful and the most dangerous woman in Sonora. Certainly her golden beauty was enough to make men lose their hearts and heads and kill one another. And there were times when she showed a calculating and unscrupulous shrewdness that equaled that of her father.

After that first shock of her entrance which Shad told himself had been timed to the split-second, when Shad and Don Pablo had shoved their guns out of sight and passed off the incident as best they could, the tension slacked off and Rosita handled the situation with cleverness.

Señora Vidal, whom everyone called the *doña,* showed up with a brown-frocked padre. Supper was a sumptuous and gay affair, for the Vidals lived after the fashion of rich Mexicans who enjoy good wine and food. Don Pablo drank far too much, but the hard glint in his black eyes never dimmed. He covertly watched Shad. Until Rosita whispered something in the ear of her father that made him scowl, then smile and shrug his straight shoulders. Shortly after supper Don Pablo bade Shad a formal good night and retired to his office.

Now was the time, Shad told himself, for Rosita to go on shift. The Golden Rose of San Luis was just as dangerous as Don Pablo.

Whoever had fetched word from Campo had told Don Pablo that Shad had killed Bob Huntoon at the latter's ranch and had stolen that money belt. Don Pablo had been so upset as to forget himself and try force where cunning would have put Shad in his power. Now it was Rosita's turn to try her luck.

"You will not be leaving us, my young friend," Don Pablo had said when he bade Shad good night. "I must insist that you stay."

Shad got the veiled threat behind the smile. He was no better than a prisoner here. Shad smelled danger everywhere.

It had ben a lie about Rosita taking a siesta. The Indian *mozo* who cleaned Shad's room let the information slip that the *señorita* had ridden away right after mass. She had not returned until late afternoon, shortly before she made her dramatic appearance in Don Pablo's private office.

Rosita suggested that Shad walk with her to a big old live-oak park half a mile from the ranch buildings. There was an old and bent and misshapen oak tree that formed a natural seat. Rosita called it the wishing tree. Its bent trunk made an ideal lovers' seat. She suggested that they go there to make a wish as the moon rose.

Shad agreed readily enough. He wanted to find out about Tom Wagner. By pretending jealousy he could ask about wild young Tom. He went to his room on some excuse. Rosita made no comment when he returned wearing his cardridge belt and holstered six-shooter.

"I'm a hunted man," he said simply, "I'd be foolish to go out without a gun."

"And nobody can accuse Shad Gibson," Rosita smiled, "of being foolish."

They walked under the trees together, holding hands. The hand holding was her idea. So that he could keep her from falling if she stumbled on the dark trail.

They sat together on the bent trunk of the wishing tree. Rosita sang in her low throaty voice. Shad's restless eyes watched the black shadows of the brush. Once or twice he was almost certain he heard some stealthy noise behind the brush.

Then the moon rose. It appeared from behind the ragged mountain skyline, round and yellow. Rosita's song ended. Perhaps it was really accidental or it might have been very clever acting. But in leaning back to look up at the moon she lost her balance. With a little gasp she grabbed at Shad's shirt. Both hands clutching him around the waist.

Shad felt her hand touch the money belt beneath his shirt. His arms were around her, holding her from falling over backward, and now Rosita gave a soft little cry. Her warm red lips found his mouth and clung.

Then the lovers' embrace was rudely, swiftly interrupted. There was a harsh, hoarse cry, and a man broke from the brushy cover. The voice, thick with whisky and rage, shouted a deadly warning.

"Damn you both! You yellow-eyed she-devil! You two-faced, tow-headed snake. Lyin' to my sister. Makin' love to my girl. I'm killin' you both!"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

The deputy's powerful hands clamped on Shad's throat

Wet Beef from Mexico

By Walt Coburn

YOUNG SHAD GIBSON, the owner of the Half-circle G ranch, is determined to kill BLACK BOB HUNTOON, for Huntoon has framed a charge of cattle-rustling against him. But on riding to the Huntoon place Shad finds that the job has been done by some one else; Huntoon is dead, shot through the back. The fact that the body is seated at a table, with cards spread out before it, does not convince Shad that Huntoon was killed where he now sits. The scene is too obviously arranged.

Shad Gibson points this out to Deputy-sheriff BURT THRASHER, but the big deputy, a close friend of Huntoon's, says the case is clear enough. Shad Gibson announced he would kill Huntoon; Shad committed the murder. So Shad is under arrest.

Bitterly angry, he asks lovely RITA WAGNER to investigate the framed murder, but Thrasher tells her to stay out of it, or her brother will be in trouble. Knowing that wild TOM WAGNER has been running outside the law, Shad decides he must protect the boy; so he calmly confesses to the murder of Bob Huntoon. The justice of the peace is Miles Huntoon, the dead man's brother; and Shad can expect no leniency from him.

ONE of Shad's most loyal friends is PAT CONNITY, an alcoholic Irish lawyer; and when Pat hears the story of Shad's arrest and false confession, he takes matters in his own hands. Through Rita Wagner he gets in touch with PECOS DRISCOLL, foreman of the Wagner ranch. That night Driscoll breaks Shad Gibson out of jail.

An old partner of Shad's father, Driscoll now reveals to Shad that BILL GIBSON'S death a few years before was not an accident, but murder. And old PETE WAGNER, he says, was shot down by four white men. Driscoll's shrewd guess is that the two murders were connected with the smuggling of cattle across the Mexican Border. Both the Gibson and Wagner ranches stretch along the Border, but their owners have never permitted wet beef to be shoved across illegally.

Pat Connity and Driscoll believe that the time has come to smash the rustling combine. Connity's scheme is for Shad Gibson to ride into Mexico to the rancho of DON PABLO VIDAL, who is known to have a hand in the cattle-smuggling. Right now young Tom Wagner must be down there, for the boy is infatuated with Don Pablo's daughter, ROSITA, called the Golden Rose. Taking refuge at the Vidal rancho, Shad should be able to learn something about the Huntoon murder.

ON the trail into Mexico Shad catches sight of a soaked bundle, which turns out to be the jacket of Black Bob Huntoon. Apparently it was cached in the hills, only to be washed down here by the heavy rains, and it proves that Huntoon was not murdered in his shack. But there's more to it than that, for wrapped in the jacket is a money belt containing ten thousand dollars.

The money belt strapped around his waist, Shad Gibson arrives at the Vidal hacienda, to be greeted warmly by Don Pablo. But after a rest Shad finds a curious change in his host's manner, and it is soon evident that Don Pablo has been informed fully about the Huntoon murder. He tells Shad there is a ten-thousand-dollar reward for his capture. But not a state reward—a private matter. Perhaps Señor Gibson can understand why the sum is precisely ten thousand dollars—no more,

This two-part serial began in last week's Argosy

no less. Don Pablo, then, must know of the money belt.

Shad expects gunplay, but the entry of Rosita prevents that. She is charming to Shad, and that night she takes him for a stroll. But Shad is on guard; and when the Golden Rose contrives to fall into his arms, he is aware of her hands searching for and finding his money belt. Then their embrace is suddenly interrupted. A hoarse voice cries out: "You she-devil! You two-headed snake! Lyin' to my sister—makin' love to my girl! I'll kill you both!" . . .

CHAPTER V

DAGGER OF THE ROSE

IT WAS wild young Tom Wagner. A split-second before his gun roared Shad threw Rosita over backward and behind the thick bent trunk of the live-oak tree. He went over after her, jerking out his gun.

Tom Wagner's bullet grazed Shad's ear. The drunken young cowman was coming toward the tree at a lurching run. Shooting wildly as he came. Shad crouched in front of the girl, gripping his gun. Bullets thudded into the tree trunk and whined past his head. The tree trunk giving him and the cowering girl a barricade.

Shad counted the shots. Four. Five. Six. Then he jumped, clearing the bent tree trunk. Charging young Tom Wagner who stood there on unsteady legs, a smoking empty six-shooter in his hand.

Shad swung his six-shooter like a club. Its long barrel thudded against the side of Tom Wagner's head, knocking him down. Shad was on top of the fallen, dazed man, rolling him over on his face, yanking his arms behind him, tying his wrists behind his back with the silk neckscarf he tore from the young cowman's throat.

He heard a sound behind him and threw himself sideways and onto his feet. He grabbed Rosita's arm, spun her around roughly, twisted her wrist behind her back in a hammerlock. His hand took the long thin-bladed knife from her hand. Then he let her go and grinned.

Rosita was breathing like a spent runner. Her golden eyes looked reddish in the moonlight. The blood was drained from her face, leaving her golden skin almost chalky white.

"Gringo!" she spat at him. "Fool!"

"I don't reckon I have too much sense, at that." He grinned at her. "I don't know which of us you aimed to shove that pig sticker into."

Shad caught a brief glimpse of a man dodging back into the black shadow of some brush. He jumped in behind the bent trunk of the wishing tree, cocking his six-shooter.

"Come out from behind that brush or I'll start shootin'!" Shad barked harshly. "Pronto!"

"You all right, Shad?" The man behind the brush called out. Shad gave a start as he recognized the lazy Texan drawl of Pecos Driscoll.

"If you are, there's no need me comin' out. Don't call me by name."

"I'm all right. I had to knock Tom Wagner cold. He's comin' alive again. I got his hands tied behind his back."

"I'll be gittin' along, Shad. I got me a wolf trapped back in the hills. Sober Tom up and make him talk. So long."

Rosita Vidal had regained something of her composure. She brushed leaves and some dirt from her Mexican peasant dress and her white teeth flashed in a smile.

Shad saw Pecos Driscoll vanish into the night, get his horse and ride away. Tom Wagner groaned, tried to get to his feet and couldn't make it. He commenced cussing as he sought to free his hands.

Rosita held out her hand toward Shad. "I'd like to have my knife back. I promise not to use it. I lost my temper for a minute. I have you to thank for saving my life. Tomas is *muy borrochon.* Too locoed drunk to know what he was doing. He needs a cold bath and some sleep.

"Poor Tomas. When he is not drunk he can be very sweet. Give me the knife and I will cut his hands free and we will all go to the house, no? The sound of shooting will be alarming Don Pablo. He and his vaqueros will be coming any minute now."

Shad shoved the knife into his red silk sash and picked up Tom Wagner's empty gun. He ejected the empty shells and re-loaded the six-shooter.

"I'll give you back your knife later, Rosita. And when Tom here gits sobered up he kin have his gun back."

SHAD reached down and yanked Tom Wagner to his feet. Tom was tall and slim with reddish hair and gray-brown eyes that were bloodshot and congested now from whisky and lack of sleep. A stubble of reddish beard marred his almost too handsome young face.

Tom kicked savagely at Shad, lost his balance and would have fallen over backward if Shad had not grabbed him by the collar of his denim brush-jacket. He slapped Tom twice across the face with the palm of his hand.

"If you were sober and any kind of a man I'd give you the damndest fist whippin' a young fool ever got. Where have you bin for a week? You'd better have a good alibi, young rooster. Otherwise you'll hang for the murder of Black Bob Huntoon. Talk fast and talk straight."

"Bob Huntoon? Dead?" Wild young Tom Wagner's drunken bluster was gone. He looked sick and scared and bewildered. Then something almost like tremendous relief showed on his unshaven face. But sullen anger overcame his other emotions. His bloodshot eyes glared at the girl. His mouth twisted in a sneering grin.

"Tell your tow-headed lover where I've been for the past week!" he snarled at her.

Men on horseback were coming from the direction of the ranch. The voice of Don Pablo could be heard shouting orders.

"Scatter out, hombres! Search the brush! Take the gringo Gibson alive. If any harm has come to my daughter I want to torture that gringo until his screams will be heard in Hell!" He was shouting in staccato Mexican.

"Better holler out that you're all right and for him to call off his hombres," Shad spoke to Rosita. "Otherwise there'll be some dead Mexicans eating breakfast in that same Hell he's hollerin' about. And my first shot will knock Don Pablo out of his saddle. I'm playin' for keeps. If you want to save your father's life, start hollerin'!"

Shad Gibson had a six-shooter in each hand. He had stepped in behind the twisted curved trunk of the wishing tree. His voice was brittle. His lips were pulled flat in a mirthless grin.

"Papa! Papa *mio*! Send the vaqueros back. I am all right. Nobody has been hurt! Nothing is wrong! Ride back to the house, Papa. The shooting was an accident. A mistake. Nobody is hurt. Ride back and take the vaqueros with you. Pronto! Or perhaps you will spoil everything!"

"Nobody has hurt your daughter, Don Pablo. Nobody has been shot. There are only some bullets in Rosita's wishing tree. No harm has been done."

Don Pablo had drunk too much before supper and afterward. He was drunk enough to want to use his gun.

Tom Wagner had been drinking hard for a week. He might make a fool of himself. He started to shout something. Shad yanked him in behind the tree and his gun barrel thudded down across the young cowman's head. He dragged Tom's unconscious form in behind the brush, and motioned Rosita to sit on the trunk of the wishing tree. He sat down beside her.

"Play your part, *chiquita*," he said as they watched Don Pablo riding alone toward them, "or your good mother will be a widow. I'll shoot first and shoot to kill. Tell him we wished on the rising moon. If you love your father, Rosita, make a quick wish now that a tow-headed gringo will spare his life."

DON PABLO rode up at a run, sliding his horse to a halt. He was wearing his shabby brown leather charro clothes and the sombrero ornamented with silver and gold. He was fully clothed, even to his spurs. Don Pablo, who should have been in bed, had not dressed hastily. He had been dressed and ready to make a night ride. In his hand was one of his silver-handled, beautifully etched six-shooters which he wore when he rode on any sort of business that took him from his hacienda.

"*Madre de Dios*, Papa!" laughed Rosita. "Put away that gun. Ride back to the house."

"There was shooting! Who was killed?" Don Pablo's voice was harsh. His black eyes glittered in the shadow of his big sombrero.

"The shooting was harmless. Nobody was shot." Rosita's laugh was soft and almost genuine.

"Who were you expectin' to be shot, Don Pablo?"

"Has that gringo Burt Thrasher—"

"Burt Thrasher has not been here, Papa."

"But you expected him, no?" Shad grinned.

Don Pablo stared hard at his daughter and this tow-headed, grinning gringo. With no little effort he regained what calm he could summon out of an alcoholic rage.

"You are wanted by the gringo law, my *amigo*. The Mexican border does not stop man hunters like Burt Thrasher. I promised you protection. I heard shooting. There is the matter of a ten-thousand-dollar reward."

"And there is the matter, *señor*," said Shad Gibson, "of the murder of Black Bob Huntoon. I did not kill Bob Huntoon. Neither did Tom Wagner. I would give ten thousand dollars, myself, to know who murdered Bob Huntoon."

"And now," said Rosita Vidal, "I think we are getting somewhere. Ride on back home, Papa. The man who killed Bob Huntoon robbed you of ten thousand dollars. I think I can tell Shad Gibson who killed Bob Huntoon. Now ride back, Papa. I think perhaps that Burt Thrasher is back in the mountains, caught in a wolf trap."

"*Por Dios*, child!" exploded Don Pablo. "I hope you are not moon locoed. That you have not forgotten that you are the daughter of Pablo Vidal. You would not sell out your own father to a gringo?"

"I want to talk to Shad alone, Papa. When I sell you out to anybody I hope to lose my soul forever. Have I ever failed you, *Papacito*?"

"No. No," repeated Don Pablo heavily. He reined his horse and rode back the way he had come, muttering, shaking his head.

"Whew!" Shad grinned at the Golden Rose of San Luis. "And any second I was scared Tom would come awake and start a fuss and we'd be sunk. He's stirrin' now."

Shad gave Rosita her pearl-handled dagger.

"Cut Tom loose. Keep your knife. Was Don Pablo robbed of ten thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"If you got back that ten thousand dollars for your father, would you tell me the name of the man who killed—"

Rosita shook her head; tightened a hand over Shad's arm, and pressed close to him—dangerously close.

"Not for ten thousand dollars. Not for anything but something that money cannot buy. I love you, Shad. Marry me and I will tell you who killed Bob Huntoon. I will tell you who killed your father, Bill Gibson."

SHAD caught his breath like a man who has been hit hard. This was the Golden Rose of San Luis. Men had fought to the death to win her smiles. She was the most beautiful woman Shad had even seen. There had been a time in his life when he had been willing to fight anything or anybody to win her love. Then there had been a swift and bitter quarrel.

What had been a mad infatuation on Shad Gibson's part had turned to a sort of loathing and contempt and hatred. And after that he had met Rita Wagner and found what he knew to be a wholesome and splendid and loyal friendship between a woman and man which had slowly ripened into the sort of love that a cowpuncher dreams about.

And now, this. This calling him back to that infatuation for a Mexican *señorita* who had laughed while men fought and killed one another to see who would win her deceptive smiles.

Shad had worshipped his father. Bill Gibson had been more like an older brother that a youngster idealizes. Hero worship is a small name for the bond that had always been between Square Bill Gibson and his son Shadrock. If Rosita Vidal could tell him who had murdered Bill Gibson, then Bob Huntoon, then . . .

"It's a deal, Rosita. All I want is a chance to kill the man who murdered my father. To clear my name of a murder charge don't matter so much. I have the money that Bob Huntoon was packin' when he was shot in the back. It goes to whoever it belongs to. I shore don't want it.

"But I don't aim to have it taken off me by any kind of force. Let Don Pablo prove his ownership and the money's his. All I'm after is a shot at the man that killed Bill Gibson.

"There's a padre at the ranch. And I reckon any man along the Mexican Border would call me the luckiest hombre in the world to be marryin' the Golden Rose of San Luis—"

Rosita Vidal's soft laugh was in Shad's ears. She kissed him swiftly; then, the knife in her hand, she went into the brush. Shad followed her, still dazed by the sudden turn of things. He was trying to get used to the sudden fact that he was going to marry Rosita Vidal. That all the dreams and hopes that he had shared with Rita Wagner were broken and shattered.

Shad saw Rosita kneel beside Tom Wagner who lay on the ground, his hands tied behind him. He saw her knife slit the silk neck handkerchief that bound Tom Wagner's hands. Then the blade raised as if to strike. Tom Wagner twisting, rolling, grabbing the hand that held the knife. Tom Wagner, teeth bared, eyes like burning coals, rushing Shad, the knife in his hand. Words ripped from a dry, tortured throat. Words that called Rosita Vidal and Shad Gibson fighting names.

Whisky and rage giving wild young Tom Wagner the strength of ten men for a few brief minutes.

Tom Wagner was tall and slim and hard-muscled. The knife in his hand stabbed and ripped as it struck, hitting bone. The slender blade snapped at the hilt. Tom Wagner's head struck Shad's jaw. Then Shad felt a thudding blow on his head, and the roar of a gun was in his ears. Everything went black.

Shad Gibson was out as cold as a rock. Blood spilled from the stab wound in his left shoulder. The broken blade of a dagger protruded an inch or two above his borrowed white silk shirt and leather charro jacket. There were powder burns on Shad's straw-colored hair where a six-shooter had exploded as the barrel crashed against his skull and the hair-triggered gun had tripped and fired the cartridge that had grazed Shad's skull.

CHAPTER VI

THE RAIDERS

SHAD felt the sloshing of water in his face. A Texan drawl sifted through that black oblivion. "Take 'er easy, son. You got a thick skull and you don't bleed easy. But you shore look like the man that was sent for and couldn't git there. Hell's about to pop and you don't want to miss out on the big fireworks."

It was the lazy Texan drawl of Pecos Driscoll.

"There was a ruckus," Shad told Pecos as the lanky Texan fastened a tight bandage around Shad's shoulder. "I was fool enough to let Rosita cut Tom Wagner loose. He grabbed her knife and charged me. Butted me in the jaw and stabbed me and grabbed back his gun that I had in my belt. He was chain lightnin'. Locoed mad."

"I got Tom a-coolin' off. I tied him down in the crick with his face above water so's he won't drown. Every time he starts a-faunchin' and a-fightin' his ropes his head gits a duckin' and he swallers some more water."

"And Rosita?"

"She got away from me," said Pecos. "While I was ropin' Tom and draggin' him down through the crick at the far end of a ketch-rope tied to my saddle horn, that little hellcat got away. Hightailed it for home."

"It's gone, Pecos."

"What's gone?"

"Ten thousand dollars in a money belt I had under my shirt. She knew I had it. Don Pedro knew I had it. Ten thousand dollars. Black Bob Huntoon had that money belt buckled on him when he was murdered along the trail somewheres. I don't know where Bob Huntoon got that much money, but I found it wrapped in his jumper. The high water had washed it down from where it had bin cached."

Shad explained briefly about the brush-jacket with the bullet hole in the back.

"It's tied to my saddle. Bob Huntoon's brush-jacket."

"It was tied to your saddle. Don Pablo has it now. And I reckon the Rosita lady got the money belt. I saw her fussin' over you when you was knocked out and I was draggin' Tom down the crick. Your shirt is pulled out and that red sash tore off you. Rosita Vidal collected that money for her old man."

"She claimed it belonged to Don Pablo."

"Then," Pecos Driscoll grinned twistedly, "Don Pablo is the man that's bin holdin' young Tom Wagner for ransom down here in Mexico. That's where Tom has bin for a week unless he's lyin' to cover up some ornery thing he's ashamed of.

"He claims that Rosita out-foxed the Mexican outlaws that had him hid back in the hills under guard. That she got him free about noon and fetched him to the Vidal ranch. She had him hid out somewhere in the house. He claims his likker was doped. That he woke up and saw her walkin' off with you in the dark.

"He cold-trailed you. Lost his head and went plumb locoed. He's coolin' off and gittin' sober. Ten minutes or so and he'll make sense. But he's still dead stuck on Rosita. I told him you was makin' a play at her just to learn what could be learned. Find out anything?"

"Rosita knows who killed my father. She wants to marry me."

"Not the way I figger it. She wanted to see you and Tom fight. She let Tom overhear you two a-talkin' about gittin' married. Then she got her knife back and cut Tom loose and let him grab the knife. She's tricky. She wanted that money you was packin'."

"She shore got it," said Shad grimly.

PECOS said he reckoned that young Tom Wagner was cold sober by now. They went down the creek to where Pecos had tied Tom down in the creek.

"Got a-plenty, Tom?" asked Pecos.

"I'm waterlogged and chilled and twice as sober as a preacher. The orneriness is drug outa me, Pecos. Honest. Shad, I've acted like a damned fool. Pecos has told me about a few things."

Tom, dripping wet, shivering, stood on the creek bank. Pecos fired questions at the sodden and bruised young cowman.

"Black Bob Huntoon had a money belt with ten thousand dollars in it when he was killed on the trail between his place and the Vidal ranch. What do you know about it, Tom?"

"It's not any too clear, Pecos," said Tom Wagner. "I lost a lot of money to Don Pablo gamblin' down here. About ten thousand dollars. I got half sober and decided to pull out for home. Get back to town in time to stop payment on the checks I'd written. But if you think you kin ride away from the Vidal ranch at night when Don Pablo don't want you to go, just try it.

"I was stopped at the barn before I could git my horse. Don Pablo's men fetched me back to the house. I felt as cheap as a plugged 'dobe peso.

" 'My young friend,' Don Pablo says in his oiliest voice, 'could it be possible that you are running away in the night? That you have some notion of stopping payment on your checks? Don't you know that between real men a gambling debt is a debt of honor?'

"I'm not a strong character," Tom Wagner went on bitterly. "I told Don Pablo that I was ashamed to have my sister know I'd gambled away ten thousand dollars.

"He turned fatherly right then. Said that he understood how I felt. But that a debt of honor was something that had to be paid, regardless. And he poured me a drink.

"He had a plan, he said, that would get him his ten thousand dollars and at the same time save me from the disgrace of tellin' my sister I'd gambled away that money. His Mexicans would take me into the hills. I would send a note to Miles Huntoon sayin' that I had bin captured by Mexican bandits and was bein' held for ransom. I would make out a check to cash. Don Pablo would send the check and note to Campo by Black Bob Huntoon who was at the Vidal ranch with me dickerin' for stolen cattle.

"The idea sounded like the one and only way out. I wrote the letter and made out a check for ten thousand dollars. Gave the check and letter to Black Bob Huntoon to deliver to Miles Huntoon at Campo. Then I rode off into the hills with a couple of Don Pablo's vaquero cattle rustlers.

"And that's where I've bin for the past week," finished Tom Wagner. "Yesterday Rosita showed up and said Don Pablo had sent for me. We rode back to the Vidal ranch together.

"She said that somethin' had gone wrong. She didn't know just what. Don Pablo would talk it over with me later. We rode in by a back trail and she smuggled me into the house. She made me promise to stay in my room. She said you were at the ranch dickerin' with Don Pablo for a secret gate to be put in your Border fence.

"I was all in. Worry and not much sleep and I'd bin drunk for a week on mescal and tequila. The drink she gave me tasted queer. Bitter. She said there was somethin' in it to make me sleep. I drank part of it and spilled the rest out the window.

"She thought I was asleep. Drugged. But I heard her ask you to go with her to her wishin' tree to watch the moon rise. I trailed you there. I damned near killed you both. I'm still crazy jealous about her. I'll git over it. Rosita

Vidal is the most beautiful girl in the world, but she's colder blooded than old Don Pablo, treacherous as a golden tiger."

"Better forgit her for a spell, Tom," said Pecos. "We got some chores to do. You and me and Shad here. Burt Thrasher and one or two of his hired hands have trailed Shad here. They're at the Vidal ranch right now. We don't know who killed Black Bob Huntoon but I'd gamble that Thrasher's the man who waylaid Black Bob who was fetchin' that ten thousand dollars to Don Pablo.

"Thrasher's scared of Miles Huntoon. He hid the money in Black Bob's jumper, packed Bob's dead carcass to his cabin, planted it there to trap Shad. Thrasher had to kill Bob Huntoon's dog to git into the cabin. He knowed that Shad was goin' to fight it out with Black Bob where he found that black-headed cattle thief. Because Black Bob Huntoon had told Rita Wagner that if she didn't marry him he'd send her brother to the pen at Yuma.

"Thrasher had to work fast. I think you almost caught him red handed there at the cabin when he set Bob Huntoon's dead body in a chair, dealt some cards to make it look like Bob Huntoon had bin playin' solitaire. Thrasher forgot to pull off the dead man's gloves. He got outa the cabin, circled around, met Shad when he was ridin' away from the Bob Huntoon place and arrested Shad for murder.

"Thrasher come back to find that money. I sighted him huntin' all over the brush for it. If he finds out that Rosita Vidal or Don Pablo has that ten thousand dollars he murdered a man to git, then Thrasher might not hesitate to do some more killin'.

"He's at the Vidal ranch right now. Rosita wasn't half as clever as she figgered when she took that money belt. Let Burt Thrasher find her with it and that money belt is the Golden Rose of San Luis' death warrant. We'd better be movin'. Here's your six-shooter, Tom. You're goin' to need it."

"Rosita knows who killed Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner," said Shad. "I aim to make her tell me. You think it was Burt Thrasher, Pecos?"

"Burt Thrasher and the two Huntoons. Miles Huntoon engineered the two killin's. He's the brains. Black Bob and Burt Thrasher done the actual work. That's my guess.

"And I'm bettin' that Don Pablo knows the story that backs up that guess of mine. So let's git goin'. I don't know how big the odds are stacked ag'in' us but we're tacklin' 'em. Ol' Pecos Driscoll and the sons of Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner. Let's go, boys!"

THEY made a strange looking trio as they went on foot through the park of live-oak trees. Tall, lanky, homely Pecos Driscoll in his faded old overalls and short denim brush jacket, a head taller than either of his younger companions. His legs were bowed and he walked with the stiff-legged gait of an old time cowhand. Battered hat pulled at an angle across his head, cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter slanted across his lean flanks. Awkward on foot but dangerous, nevertheless.

Young Tom Wagner, his cowpuncher clothes still sodden, boots squishing with every step from wet socks. Shivering a little, nerves on edge from his sudden and drastic sobering up. A desperate glint in his bloodshot eyes as he limped along.

Shad Gibson in bloodstained leather charro clothes and bloody white silk shirt. Hatless, bandaged, a twisted grin on his face. He walked, his gait easy, sure-footed, his hand brushing the butt of his holstered gun.

They were still a couple of hundred yards from the corrals and adobe buildings that showed plainly in the moonlight, when they heard the sudden sound of shooting. Men were cursing in two languages. Suddenly horses bolted into the night with empty saddles. Then a couple of badly scared Mexican vaqueros were spurring and whipping their horses to a dead run as they headed for the open country beyond. There was the shrill and terrified scream of a woman. The scream choked off abruptly.

"Kill the damned greaser! We got the doublecrossin' old *paisano*— Watch that she-hellcat, boys! She'll knife you!"

Pecos gripped young Tom Wagner's arm, holding him back. He growled a warning as he pulled his gun.

"Hold on, Tom. Take 'er steddy! We won't win a damn' thing by chargin' 'em. That's Burt Thrasher a-hollerin'. He's got his tough hands with 'im."

Guns popped. Men yelled hoarsely. Mexican women and children were shouting, frightened, panicky. Doors slammed shut. Dogs barked. Burt Thrasher's half dozen tough hands were riding around shooting off their six-shooters. Burt Thrasher, killer and cattle rustler, was taking over the San Luis rancho.

"He's either locoed or drunk or he's got an ace in the hole," growled Pecos Driscoll. "Burt Thrasher and his renegade deputies is shore bustin' things wide open. Keep to the shadows, boys. Foller me."

Burt Thrasher's men had located Don Pablo's wine cellar. They were getting drunk, shooting off their guns, driving the Mexican families into the inadequate shelter of their little adobe homes. The men rode their horses back and forth as they waved bottles and brandished six-shooters and carbines.

"I count six of 'em," said Pecos. "How many do you boys tally?"

It was hard to get the exact count on the gringo raiders. Shad said he reckoned Pecos' tally was right.

"I can't stand much more of that, Pecos. If they start hurtin' women and kids, I'm cuttin' loose."

"Take 'er easy, Shad. Tuck in your shirttail," cautioned Pecos as they ran and dodged through brush and between buildings and corrals, keeping as much as they could to the black shadows.

"They'll git their drinkin' done," added Pecos, "afore they git wild enough to harm the wimmen. That'll take some time—"

Young Tom Wagner gave a grunting cry. He had seen one of the riders trying to ride down a woman with a baby in her arms. But it was Pecos Driscoll's six-shooter that blotted out Tom's curse.

The tipsy rider swayed drunkenly in his saddle. The horse whirled, lunged forward, head swinging as its rider toppled sideways from his saddle and hit the ground with a thud. The man lay there in a motionless heap, a shattered bottle gripped in his dead hand.

"You know how to git into the house, Tom," said Pecos, ejecting the smoking shell from his six-shooter and shoving a cartridge into the empty chamber. "Lead the way. Git. Nobody noticed what happened. We're still lucky."

TOM WAGNER led them at a run. The three went into the rambling adobe house by a side door. Shad knew his bearings. At the end of a arched corridor, which was lighted by candles in wall niches, was the private office and smoking room of Don Pablo.

From behind the closed door of carved black oak came the muffled sound of voices. The dead bodies of two of Don Pablo's vaqueros lay in the corridor. One of Burt Thrasher's gringos was squatted on his heels, his back to them, trying to twist the cork out of a bottle with the blade of his jack-knife.

Shad Gibson covered that fifteen feet of dimly lighted corridor with a couple of long leaps. The man twisted around. Shad landed on top of him, gun barrel swinging. The gun thudded against the man's head with a sickening crack that shattered bone. The man went limp. Pecos and

Tom Wagner were right behind Shad as he got to his feet, the man's six-shooter in his left hand.

Pecos had taken the guns of the two dead vaqueros. He handed one six-shooter to Tom and kept the other. They halted at the closed door, crouching, listening, watching the corridor.

Burt Thrasher's harsh voice sounded clearly from within the room beyond the closed door.

"This is the payoff, Vidal. You got that ten thousand dollars. Before I git done with you, you'll beg for a chance to tell me what you done with it.

"Pull his boots off, boys. Then roast his bare feet with that candle. If that don't work, we'll start in on Don Pablo's Golden Rose of San Luis. I'll learn her to stick a knife in Burt Thrasher. But before we git busy with the candle burnin', git your ears full of this news, Vidal. We're takin' the San Luis Grant.

"Yeah. Takin' 'er legal. Miles Huntoon got the papers for it. And, you didn't have sense enough to know that the San Luis Grant takes in the Gibson and Wagner ranches north of the Border.

"Miles Huntoon dug up the old records. The State of Arizona will have to give him the Gibson ranch and the Wagners' Campo ranch. Miles Huntoon's claimin' 'em. He sent me down here to tell you to git to hell off the San Luis Grant or git run off. And to fetch him the Golden Rose of San Luis.

"You figgered you could marry your daughter to Miles Huntoon! By grab, that shore is a good 'un. Miles Huntoon ain't marryin' no damned Mex. Miles wants her to dance fer him and sing songs to him.

"This is the payoff, Pablo. You got some money you collected on young Tom Wagner's hide before your men killed him. Bob Huntoon told me all about it when I left Campo with him to see that he got along all right.

"Black Bob said he was killin' Tom Wagner if you didn't git the job done. That neither of you could afford to have that drunken young whelp runnin' off at the head. But Bob didn't kill nobody. He met up with bad luck. When I find Shad Gibson, he'll hang for that murder.

"But in this here office of your'n I found Bob Huntoon's jumper with a bullet hole in the back. It laid there on the floor. Whoever found it found ten thousand dollars in a money belt. Before I git done with you and your Golden Rose of San Luis, you're handin' over that ten thousand bucks.

"I killed one man to git it. I'm not stoppin' at just one killin'. The feller that's pullin' off your boots likes to hear a burnin' man holler. The two fellers holdin' that daughter and wife of your'n hates Mexicans. Miles Huntoon owns the San Luis. I'm ramroddin' the spread for him. Git to work on the old man first. Then the old lady and the Golden Rose of San Luis."

"I've stood all a man kin stand!" Young Tom Wagner's face was drained of blood. He started to open the door.

"Steady, sons!"

Pecos Driscoll's homely face twisted in an ugly grin. He kicked the door wide open. He went in fighting, Shad Gibson and young Tom Wagner at his back.

CHAPTER VII

HANDS ARE WEAPONS

SHAD GIBSON saw Don Pablo tied in his chair, his boots pulled off, a man on one knee with a lighted candle that he was holding against the Mexican's bare feet.

On the other side of the room Señora Vidal and Rosita were sitting in chairs, arms tied behind their backs. Two renegade white men with six-shooters stood guard over them.

Burt Thrasher sat on the desk, one spurred boot touching the floor, the other leg swinging. A bottle of whisky in one hand, six-shooter in the other. There was a grin on his heavy-jawed face and his bloodshot eyes glinted in the candle light.

The six candles in the heavy silver candle holder, placed on the desk near where the burly deputy sat, furnished the lighting for the room. Then it was wiped into sudden darkness as Burt Thrasher, moving with surprising speed for a big man, knocked over the candle holder. He shot at the same instant, just as Shad leaped at him, swinging his gun like a club, not daring to shoot for fear of hitting one of the women or Don Pablo.

Thrasher and the three men with him had been taken by surprise. Their guns blazed wildly. Pecos leaped on the man holding the candle. The barrel of his six-shooter crashed down on the man's skull.

"Thrasher's my meat!" Shad shouted above the roar of guns.

He felt the burning sting of Thrasher's bullet grazing his ribs. Then he was on top of the big deputy and they were crashing over the desk and onto the floor. Shad fought to grab the big man's gun which kept blazing almost in his face. Burning powder stung his flesh. He grabbed Thrasher's gun arm at the wrist, twisting, jerking. His own gun clubbed the deputy's head. They rolled over and over on the floor, crashing into the chair where Don Pablo sat tied, overturning it. It was a fight to the death.

At the other side of the room young Tom Wagner charged the blazing guns of Thrasher's two men who were shooting wildly. He dove low under the crimson streak of one gun and when he knocked the man down, fell on top of him. A bullet tore Tom's thigh. Kicking and clubbing, he kept on fighting.

The third man made a rush for the open doorway where the dimly lighted corridor showed. As he reached the doorway he made a good target. Pecos Driscoll, crouched near the doorway, fired once. The man stumbled, fell, rolled over on his side, then lay still.

Shad Gibson had tackled a tough customer. Thrasher out-weighed him fifty pounds and the deputy was all bone and beef. Shad had gone into the room with a gun in each hand, dropped one when he tackled Thrasher in the dark, and now Thrasher's huge hand had grabbed the barrel of Shad's gun and was bending and twisting it, while Shad kept his grip on the big deputy's gun wrist.

The weight and brute strength were Thrasher's. Shad's right hand was losing its grip on his gun as Thrasher bent his arm back. His hold was slipping on the deputy's thick wrist which yanked and jerked like a horse kicking in his face. He was losing his fight.

Burt Thrasher rolled on top of Shad, his two hundred pounds pinning Shad down. Thrasher's head was close to his. The deputy's whisky breath was in his face. The big man's weight was crushing Shad's ribs. Shad was losing his fight to the man who had killed his father.

Shad let go his hold on the big deputy's wrist. Let go his own gun. His two free hands grabbed for Burt Thrasher's throat and found it. Clamped like fingers of steel. His long legs swung up and around Thrasher's hips and held like a vise, feet locked together.

A choked cry burst from Thrasher's throat. The big man's wind was shut off as if by the closing jaws of a steel trap. He fought with a strangling desperate fury. The gun in his hand roared and the bullet struck the tile floor only a few inches from Shad's head, whining as it ricocheted.

Thrasher's heaving weight rolled Shad from underneath, but he still had his long legs clamped around the big man's thighs and his two hands had Thrasher's throat in a death grip. Thrasher's gun exploded again and the bullet missed Shad's head by sheer luck.

Burt Thrasher's breath was coming in whistling gasps. His heavy body was losing its strength. He clubbed desperately at Shad's head. A blow of the gun barrel glanced off Shad's cheek and nose and the pain was sickening. Shad fought off dizziness and clung to the deputy's swelling, strangling throat. Thrasher's breath was rattling now.

The big man's gun barrel kept striking at Shad's head, hitting his shoulders, banging against the tile floor as Shad, fighting from underneath, tried to keep the strength from ebbing out of his hands and arms and legs.

Dimly, as if he were in some horrible nightmare, Shad heard shooting. Heard a woman screaming. Heard the voice of Pecos Driscoll as if from some far distant place.

Shad could not feel any more pounding at his head and shoulders. Burt Thrasher's two-hundred-pound body was a dead weight on top of him now, motionless, inert. Shad's senses reeled in a black nauseating whirl. He used every last shred of strength and will power to keep his legs locked around the big man's thighs. To keep his fingers sunk deep into the corded swollen flesh of Burt Thrasher's throat.

That was the last that he remembered—that will to hang on with his hands the way a bulldog grips with its teeth.

THEN his senses returned. Cold water was splashing in his face. Somebody was trying to pour whisky down his throat. Somebody was telling him to swallow. Another voice was telling him to break his hold. Hands were pulling at his wrists and fingers.

He gritted his teeth and clung harder. Then his eyes opened and he blinked into the bright candle light in front of his face. Pecos Driscoll, his face smeared with blood, was grinning at him like some bloody ghastly mask.

"Let 'im go, Shad! Break your holt! You got the big son choked to death! You done killed Burt Thrasher, boy! Killed him with your bare hands! Let go his neck! Break away, Shad boy!"

Shad's fingers let go their death grip. His legs lost their scissors hold. Somebody rolled that heavy weight off his chest. Shad sat up with dizzy painful effort, Don Pablo's lean hands helping him, steadying him. Shad looked into the black, swollen face with its bulging eyes and protruding tongue and knew that the face belonged to Burt Thrasher.

Hanged men looked like that. Shad had seen a hanged man once when he was a boy. He, Shad Gibson, had done that with his hands to the man who had killed his father.

Pecos Driscoll covered the dead man's face with a faded blue denim brush-jacket he had found in the room. The jacket had a bullet hole in the middle of the back. Black Bob Huntoon's brush-jacket.

"Where's Tom Wagner?" Shad found his voice.

"Rosita and the *doña* are helping the padre dress his wounds," said Don Pablo. "Drink this, my young *amigo*. It is twenty-year-old whisky."

It occurred to Shad that there was no longer any shooting outside or in the corridor. Pecos answered the question in his eyes.

"We got 'em as they come chargin' into the house. Young Tom and Don Pablo and me. It was like ketchin' fish when they're bitin' good. Them gringo sons come a-chargin' in to kill and plunder. They run slap-dab into a hornet's nest.

"Don Pablo had got loose from the chair he was tied to and grabbed a gun. Young Tom fought like a wildcat. He stopped three-four bullets that'll slow him down for a few weeks but he'll live. That padre is the best doctor in the country. And from the way it looked when they carried him into her bedroom, the Señorita Rosita is the only nurse that wild young cowhand will be needin'."

Pecos adjusted the bandage that had slipped from his bullet-torn cheek. Grinned widely as Don Pablo handed him a filled glass.

"*Señors,*" said Don Pablo, "*Compadres.* You have saved my life and the life of my good señora. And you have saved my daughter. We are forever in your debt. Salud!"

LATER, when the padre had dressed Shad's bruised shoulders and head and the bullet rip along his ribs, when they had sat with the wounded Tom Wagner until he dropped off to sleep, holding tightly to Rosita Vidal's hand, Shad and Pecos and Don Pablo went into the office, which had been cleaned and scrubbed of the last bloody traces of the battle, and Don Pablo handed Shad the filled money belt.

"The money belongs to Tom Wagner and his sister. You will return it to her. And now if you care to listen I will tell you what I know concerning the murder of Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner."

"That's the main reason why Pat Connity sent us down here," said Pecos Driscoll. "He figgered that somehow we'd git to the bottom of the whole thing."

"Black Bob Huntoon is dead," said Don Pablo. "Burt Thrasher is likewise dead. Those are the two men who did the actual killing from what I have gathered from time to time from their drunken boasting.

"But the man who planned it was Miles Huntoon. I give you my word *señors,* I had nothing to do with the murder of those two men. Until a month or so ago I had believed their deaths to be accidental. Then the actions of Miles Huntoon caused me to be suspicious.

"Miles Huntoon paid us frequent visits. He came to pay court to my daughter Rosita. But in order to win my approval of his courtship, Miles Huntoon offered me a proposition.

"He told me that he would one day own both the Gibson and the Wagner ranches. Then, he said, the Gibson fence would be opened. He and I would join the two big ranches that would take in all the range on both sides of the Border.

"There would no longer be any necessity for my vaqueros to steal cattle from my Mexican enemies whose ranches join my San Luis Grant. The man knew of my great ambitions; he knew I would go to any lengths to get what I wanted. He knew of my desire to marry my daughter to a man of wealth and power.

"He is a man who is not unattractive to women. Rosita has something of my love for power and wealth. Not until an hour or so ago when she thought young Tom Wagner was dying did she ever show an honest and real love for any man.

"Now you see me a defeated man. I stand before you humbled and sincere and willing to do my share in repairing any wrong I have caused. Rosita has found the man she loves. I am content to give up the San Luis Grant. I have enough money put away to last me and my wife. I am content to live somewhere in a modest manner the rest of my days. The prayers of the good *doña* have been answered.

"If you hope to catch Miles Huntoon you had better work fast. News travels swiftly. When he hears of Burt Thrasher's defeat here he might lose his nerve and quit the country. Though perhaps not. He is a shrewd and ruthless man.

"Burt Thrasher was not lying when he said that Miles

Huntoon has dug up old documents that will hold in a court of law and give him the San Luis Grant, including the Gibson ranch and the Wagner Campo ranch. I have an old map that so defines the borders of the San Luis Grant. And it will be hard to prove a charge of murder against a man as clever as Miles Huntoon."

"That," said Shad grimly, "is a little matter that we won't be callin' on the law to settle. Thrasher and Bob Huntoon are dead. Miles Huntoon is the next man on the list. Cartridges are surer and cheaper than lawsuits and provin' a murder charge against a man like Miles Huntoon. I've got a cartridge with his name on it. So has Pecos. And I reckon it's time we hit the trail for the cow town of Campo, eh, Pecos?"

CHAPTER VIII

BRAVE FLAG OF IRELAND

IT was sunrise when Shad Gibson and Pecos Driscoll, bandaged, weary-eyed, grim-lipped, rode up to Miles Huntoon's house at the edge of Campo. They swung from their saddles and while Pecos watched the rear of the adobe house where the judge lived with a Mexican housekeeper, Shad pounded loudly on the front door.

Nobody answered his pounding, and he made ready to smash in the door. But the door was not locked. A turn of the handle opened it. He went in with his gun in his hand, and Pecos entered by the rear door which was likewise unlocked. They met in the hallway. A quick search of the house showed that it was empty. They looked at one another, chagrin and bitter disappointment in their eyes.

"Looks like Miles Huntoon got some bad news and quit the country," said Shad. "He's got away on us."

But his bed was made, his clothes hung up in his closet, his whole house in order. There was no indication of anything like a hurried departure.

"We'll try his office. He might be there."

They rode down the main street to his office which was a modest adobe building on Campo's main and only street.

On the door was tacked a notice: *Closed Indefinitely.*

They peered through the uncurtained window. The office was empty. There was no use in searching further for their man. Pecos said that perhaps Pat Connity might know something of Miles Huntoon's disappearance but there was little hope in their hearts as they rode on down the street, headed for Patrick Henry Connity's place at the other end of town.

They told themselves that Miles Huntoon had gotten word of the fight at the Vidal ranch and had quit Campo for parts unknown. Pulled out in the night. When the sleepy little cow town of Campo awoke and started about its daily business the citizens, mostly Mexicans, would find that notice tacked to the door of the office of Judge Miles Huntoon, Justice of the Peace. It was a bitter dose for Shad Gibson and Pecos Driscoll to swallow after a night's hard and weary ride.

Before they sighted Pat Connity's house, which was off the main street and hidden from sight by mesquite and palos verdes trees, Shad and Pecos heard sounds that caused them to sit erect in their saddles and look at one another in puzzled bewilderment. Strange sounds were shattering the peaceful silence of the desert sunrise.

Shouting. The barking of dogs. The beating of a drum. The unmistakable voice of Patrick Henry Connity lifted in song. Singing *The Wearing of the Green.* Smaller, shriller voices taking up the tune and the words.

Then they reined up, staring. The Irish flag with its golden harp on a green background fluttered from the top of a high flagpole in front of Pat Connity's house. And around the flagpole marched as strange a procession as the two men had ever seen.

Patrick Henry Connity in a clean white suit, wearing a green tie and a large shamrock in his coat lapel, led the procession. Behind him marched the half dozen small Murillos wearing caps made of bright green paper. Aurelio, the oldest of the boys, was pounding a drum. The wire-haired dog O'Banion, a large green ribbon tied in a bow knot around his neck, barked and charged about, scattering stray chickens.

"Pecos," Shad's voice lost something of its bitter disappointment, "what day of the month is it?"

"Somewheres around the sixteenth-seventeenth of March."

"Saint Patrick's Day," said Shad, grinning. "Saint Patrick's Day in the mornin'."

ONE of the small Murillos was the first to sight the two riders. He shouted something in a shrill excited voice. The procession halted, piling up in confusion. The drum whammed a final boom and went silent. Pat Connity's song broke off in the middle. He shouted loudly at the open door of his adobe house.

"Rita! Carlos! Mamacita Murillo! It's Shad Gibson and Pecos Driscoll back from the San Luis ranch. And they look like they're just returned from the wars!"

Rita Wagner came running out. She was wearing a green dress and a green ribbon in her hair. Carlos Murillo, following, had a shamrock pinned to a pinkish silk shirt. The buxom Señora Murillo wore a green sash around her ample waist.

Rita Wagner gave a little sob as Shad swung from his saddle and took her in his arms.

"Tom?" she whispered "What's happened to Tom?"

"A whole lot," Shad grinned down at her fear stricken face, "and all of it good news. Tom's all right. He was never in better shape in his life."

"God and Saint Patrick be praised for that bit of fine news on this Saint Patrick's Day in the mornin'," said Pat Connity. Then he turned to the six small Murillos, a wide grin on his red face.

They stood there in their green paper hats, dressed in their Sunday clothes, scrubbed until their brown skins shone, huddling together in wide-eyed awe at the two bandaged cowpunchers.

"Aurelio, Pancho, Jaoquin, Pasqual, Margarita, Lupe," he called the roll of the small Murillos, "Tell Shad Gibson and Pecos Driscoll the great news. All together now. One, two, three, go!"

"Queen Isabella . . . has . . . six . . . pups! Born on Saint Patrick's Day in the mornin'!"

The chorus started weakly, timidly, gained strength and confidence, ended in shrill shouting. While O'Banion ran in circles, barking. And the Murillo dog Queen Isabella, a lady dog of mixed parentage that favored bird-dog ancestry, appeared in the cabin doorway, tail wagging. As if taking her cue to accept proper and fitting applause.

Carlos Murillo pointed to Queen Isabella and laughed. His wife beamed. O'Banion cavorted and barked and licked Queen Isabella's face. Then Queen Isabella, also decorated with a green ribbon, went back into the house where she had left her six newly born puppies.

"Rita and I sat up all night with her," said Pat Connity. "The first puppy came at a quarter past midnight. And now it's a bit of a drink we'll be havin' while Aurelio and Panchito, Jaquin and Pasqual put up your horses.

"And you can be tellin' us how you come to be bandaged like a couple of mummies. And it's good Irish whisky ye'll be takin' to wash the dust of the trail out of your

throats. Come inside, now, the both of ye. If ever two men looked like they had need of a nip—"

"We'll take a drink, I'll tell a man," said Pecos. "Then we'll saddle two fresh horses and hit the trail. We're after Miles Huntoon and we ain't stoppin' till we cut his sign."

"Ye'll be needin' no fresh horses, then. Unless it is that from here to the jail is too far for a couple of cowpunchers to walk." The bright blue eyes of Patrick Henry Connity twinkled.

"Jail!" blurted Shad Gibson.

"AND I've got the key in me pocket and Miles Huntoon locked like a fine feathered rooster in a coop. With his tail feathers pulled. Thanks to my good friends Carlos Murillo and Dwight Smith and their bright legal minds and the sharp teeth av the O'Banion and the two fists av Patrick Henry Connity." Pat Connity blew gently on bruised and swollen knuckles and did a jig step. Then bowing elaborately to Rita Wagner.

"Aye, and to the courage av the fairest colleen in any land. To Rita Wagner goes the credit for faith and courage and that rare gift in a woman, the ability to keep a silent tongue in her head." He beamed at Shad and Pecos.

"That curly wolf baited his own trap with as clever a bit av shenanigans and forgery as ever was perpetrated. Never countin' on the legal minds of such men as Dwight Smith who knows the last bit of land law in the West, and Carlos Murillo who is the grand master of Mexican law and the transfer of titles of old Spanish Grants. Miles Huntoon did bait his own trap.

"The charge against him is grand theft and forgery of legal documents. There's the graver charge of murder that I'm hopin' to prove against Judge Miles Huntoon, the dirty scut!"

Shad Gibson took a stained little red-backed tally book from his pocket and handed it to Pat Connity.

"This belonged to Black Bob Huntoon. Rosita Vidal managed to get hold of it once before it was stained by water. In Bob Huntoon's handwritin' somewhere in this tally book is evidence that will prove that Miles Huntoon hired him and Burt Thrasher to kill Bill Gibson and Pete Wagner.

"Black Bob put it in writin' and Miles Huntoon's name is signed to it and it's witnessed by Burt Thrasher. Black Bob was holdin' it as a weapon against his brother Miles in case Miles tried to double-cross him. None of those thieves trusted one another."

Pat Connity nodded. "Miles Huntoon knows now that Burt Thrasher killed Black Bob Huntoon. One of Thrasher's men sold that big deputy out to Judge Huntoon. Miles Huntoon planned to kill Burt Thrasher for that murder of his brother after the law had sent Shadrock here to Yuma prison.

"Burt Thrasher's killin' was to be passed off as the result of somethin' else and the killin' would be made to look like self-defense. The man who sold Burt Thrasher out to Miles Huntoon sold Miles Huntoon out to Patrick Henry Connity for more easy money. There is no honor, as the sayin' goes, among thieves.

"And now," Pat Connity smiled, "we'll drink the health av the O'Banion who bit a hunk out av the leg av Miles Huntoon while I was swingin' me fists. Later we'll pay Miles Huntoon a bit av a visit at the calaboose. To the O'Banion and Queen Isabella!"

THE morning hours were taken up with the festivities of Saint Patrick's Day. The men drank Irish whisky. Rita and Señora Murillo sipped lemonade colored red with berry juice for the small Murillos. Dwight Smith joined them for the banquet prepared by the Señora Murillo and served by Rita Wagner.

Pecos told the story of the battle at the Vidal ranch. Because of the women and wide-eyed little Murillos he passed over the killing of Burt Thrasher with the simple statement that Shad Gibson had done the job.

"Patrick Henry Connity," dapper little Dwight Smith announced in a crisply worded speech, "will be sworn in as the new justice of the peace here at Campo. I know of no man better fitted for that honor."

Dwight Smith's speech called for much cheering. Another drink. More pink lemonade for the almost-bursting small Murillos.

The banquet over, Pat Connity took Shad Gibson and Pecos Driscoll over to the jail.

"Give me the jail key, Pat," Shad had suggested earlier in the day. "Pecos will loan me his six-shooter to give to Miles Huntoon. I'll give him a fightin' even chance for his life."

"That job," Pecos had protested solidly, "belongs to me, son."

"The Law," decided Pat Connity with a finality that forbade further argument, "will hang Miles Huntoon."

He repeated it now as he unlocked the outer door and led the way into the gray shadowed jail.

At the barred door of Miles Huntoon's cell they halted suddenly. The perfectly tailored body of Judge Miles Huntoon hung by a short length of rope tied to the ridge log and looped around Miles Huntoon's neck. The man had stood on a chair to adjust the rope for his hanging, then had kicked away the chair.

A signed confession had been written out and left on the bunk. Pat Connity spoke in a hushed tone.

"Get on back to the house, Shadrock. Pecos and I will attend to things here. Last night when I took the man his supper he asked for pen and ink and paper and a ten-foot length of rope. It was not for me to refuse a prisoner a simple request. Nor was it for me to ask questions. Call it cowardice or courage. It is not for us to judge. Amen."

Shadrock Gibson walked a little unsteadily out of the gray shadow of the adobe jail and out into the bright March sunshine. Rita Wagner was waiting for him at Pat Connity's house.

There were plans to make. The uniting of the three ranches that straddled the Border. The tearing down of the ten-wire Border fence for which there would be no further need.

Don Pablo would still own the Mexican half of the San Luis Grant. Shad Gibson and the Wagners would be running the Half-circle G and Campo Ranches. There would also be the annexing of the Walking H and the Drag T outfits. Shad had a filled money belt to give to Rita. And they would be leaving soon, Shad and Rita, for the Vidal ranch where the padre would perform a double marriage.

There would be a great fiesta there at the old San Luis Rancho. Pecos, Pat Connity, Dwight Smith, the entire Murillo family would attend the wedding fiesta. The opening of the fence that would unite the Arizona and Mexican halves of the old Spanish San Luis Grant would be a ceremony attended by Border Patrol officials.

It was good to walk in the bright sunshine of Saint Patrick's Day. Shad saluted the Irish flag that moved limply in the breeze. Rita Wagner, O'Banion at her heels, walked toward him.

THE END

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